



SREB

## Motivating Students to Put Forth Their Best Effort and Other Tips for Administering the *High Schools That Work* and Middle Grades Assessments

The *High Schools That Work* (*HSTW*) Assessment has been used to provide high schools with information on their progress in improving student achievement since the early 1990s. Every other even-numbered year, nearly 1,000 *HSTW* sites in 36<sup>1</sup> states assess approximately 63,000 students using tests referenced to National Association of Educational Progress (NAEP) proficiency standards designed to measure the progress of 12th-graders in reading, mathematics and science. A survey of student experiences is administered in conjunction with the subject tests. The Middle Grades Assessment is also administered in even-numbered years and consists of NAEP-based tests of eighth-graders in reading, mathematics and science and a survey of student experiences.

Despite the fact that accountability testing has increased in participating states over the past few years, more than 1,250 schools continue to give SREB assessments on a voluntary basis. The reason they do so is relatively simple — the data provided fills a need. While state tests illustrate how high school and middle grades students are doing in core subject areas, the results of the *HSTW* and Middle Grades Assessments illustrate the quality of experiences students have had in school. This information enables schools to continue to engage their faculties in seeing why they must make fundamental changes that will result in deeper implementation of the *HSTW* and *MMGW* 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 *MMGW* 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 publication is designed to share tips collected from some of the many schools that are successful in administering the *HSTW* and Middle Grades Assessments and answer some of the most commonly asked questions about the tests.

As you read this document you will find that schools across the country are using a wide variety of strategies to get students and teachers to take the assessments seriously. Most of the strategies presented can be used at either grade level (i.e., eighth or 12th), but ultimately those you select will differ based on your location, history with the assessment and your student body, among other things. Regardless of how you proceed, it is important to remain mindful that there is no magic bullet for giving a successful assessment. In addition to careful planning, the schools that are the most successful have adopted the *HSTW* and *MMGW* Goals as their own goals and expect all students to do their best every day. They recognize that the assessment is a key part of their school improvement efforts.

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<sup>1</sup> *HSTW* has 32 member states. The *HSTW* Assessment is administered to schools in 36 states.

## **Tip One: *Plan Ahead!***

Schools may administer the *HSTW* and Middle Grades Assessments at any time during the four-week testing windows provided by SREB at the beginning of the school year. The first step toward administering a successful student assessment is to select testing dates and get them on school and district calendars early in the school year. As you select dates for the assessment, consider other commitments you must meet during the early spring, your spring break schedule, if applicable, and the climate in which you live. If you live in an area where snow is likely, it is best not to select the last week of testing in case weather causes school closures or delays that might interfere with testing. For the most part, late assessment materials cannot be scanned and results cannot be provided by ETS as the acceptance of late materials causes delays in reporting results to all participating schools.

Consider your local conditions and patterns of student attendance in advance to maximize scheduling time for the assessment. The survey and assessments may be given over one to four days, with an additional day reserved for make-up testing. Some schools find that administering three tests and a survey in one day is too exhausting for students, while others find that getting the same group of students in one room for three straight days presents a greater challenge. Most schools opt to give the assessment in the morning when students are fresh. Also consider when you will administer the student survey. Some schools give the student survey on the first day, while others wait until the last day after students have completed the subject tests.

### ***Careful Assessment Planning Proves Successful for a First-year Site***

Mid Rivers Tech Prep Consortium in Eolia, Missouri, gave the *HSTW* Assessment for the first time in 2005. In planning for the assessment, Principal Walter Logan thought carefully about the types of communications he would need to send students and their parents about the assessment and about the testing conditions that would allow them to do their best. First, he sent students letters to their homes stating that they had been selected to participate in the assessment and asked them to RSVP whether they would attend and how they would travel to the test site. Without stating the test was mandatory, the letter encouraged students to attend by emphasizing that this was an opportunity for them to provide feedback so the school could make improvements for future students.

In order to build student motivation, Logan used funds he had set aside from his state *HSTW* grant to rent a meeting room at a resort near the school that few students in his rural community visited. Permission slips were distributed to students several days prior to the assessment. Parents were asked to sign the permission slips and to indicate whether or not students would be driving to the testing site. In several cases, testing assistants drove students without their own transportation and who did not feel comfortable asking other students for a ride. Teachers were also asked to sign the permission slip and list the assignments that students would miss and need to make up. Teachers reminded students about the assessment frequently and the CTE director went to individual students to remind them to have their permission slips signed.

Students completed the survey portion of the assessment at the Tech Prep Center. The following day, all three tests were administered at the resort and breakfast, breaks and lunch were served.

Each participating student was given a \$10 gift card from Wal-Mart and additional gift cards were given out on-site as prizes. All but six of the 60 students selected to participate completed the assessment. Make-up tests were administered to the remaining six students for a response rate of 100 percent.

## ***Tip Two: Read the Test Preparation Materials Carefully***

As you plan, read carefully the materials sent by ETS on preparing for the assessment. The ETS information packet contains a checklist and timeline for site coordinators, a sample test administration guide and instructions for selecting a random sample of students to participate in the assessment. When the student sampling guidelines are followed closely, assessment results are more likely to be accurate and applicable to the larger student population. When selecting the group of students your school will test, be sure to include at least five alternates or more if you are sampling earlier than December. By doing so, you will be prepared if students move or transfer prior to the assessment or if attendance during testing is typically a problem. Keep in mind that alternates should be used in the order they are selected.

The ETS packet also contains instructions for completing course matching (i.e., matching your school's course titles with the standardized course titles used by SREB). The process typically entails the site coordinator distributing sections of the course-matching guide and the course-matching chart provided by ETS to department chairs who list the courses taught at your school that match SREB course titles and content descriptors. The site coordinator assembles the information provided by each department into a final course-matching chart. Accurate completion of course matching will help ensure that students' coursework is coded accurately during the course experience component of the student survey. Because course titles are added and removed each year, it is important to update your chart annually.

Assessment preparation materials are sent to sites in the fall approximately two weeks after assessment orders are placed. If you did not receive your packet of materials, you can contact ETS for another packet or download and print the contents of the packet from the SREB Web site at [www.sreb.org](http://www.sreb.org).

## ***Tip Three: Determine What Motivates Your Students to Do Their Best and Act Accordingly***

Perhaps the single greatest challenge facing schools is motivating students to take the assessments seriously and to put forth their best effort. So great is this challenge that most tips in this publication ultimately relate back to increasing student motivation in some form.

Schools successful in motivating students employ a variety of strategies. They demonstrate to students that participation is important and appreciated. They also find ways to make the typical school day a little less "typical" for participating students. Of course, students' grade level (i.e., eighth or 12th grade) and other local conditions dictate what is feasible and even acceptable. Hopefully, the following strategies will provide some food for thought.

Talawanda High School in Ohio holds an academic pep rally, which includes remarks from school and district officials explaining the importance of the assessment and thanking students for doing their best. The coordinators provide breakfast before the rally and entertain students with a speaker/musician who sparks students' enthusiasm and promotes positive feelings about their part in the assessment. In both the 2002 and 2004 assessments, the school had a 100 percent completion rate on all three tests and the student survey.

Betty Jo Jordan, the *HSTW* state coordinator in West Virginia, gives the example of the Marion County Schools. In this rural district, the superintendent got the names of each student and scheduled a night with each of his four schools to meet with selected students and have pizza with them and their parents. Thanks to his efforts, participation among the students selected to participate exceeded 90 percent.

To prepare for the Middle Grades Assessment, Janet Henke, the former principal of Old Court Middle School in Baltimore, Maryland, sends a letter home to parents describing the assessment and its importance to the school. In addition, students who complete the assessment are given a coupon for free ice cream for each day of testing they complete. The ice cream coupons are donated as are coupons from Pizza Hut. Students enter a drawing for the Pizza Hut coupons and for a gift certificate to a local music store when the assessments are completed.

Terry Yates, principal of Mercer County High School in Kentucky, thought about what motivates different groups of students at his school. He recognized that most students were motivated to attend school athletic events. As a result, he encourages participation by giving each student who completes the assessment a CATS photo ID card that allows them free entrance into home athletic events. In addition, Yates has worked with teachers to allow participating students possible exemption from a final and one additional excused tardy. Participating students are also allowed one extra college visit day, which works to motivate the college-bound and Advanced Placement students. Meals are provided for students during the assessment to allow flexibility and reduce the pressure to finish early that co-op students had felt previously.

### ***New York Career Center Goes the Distance to Motivate Students***

Gary Suraci, principal of Ulster County BOCES in Port Ewen, New York, employs a variety of strategies to motivate his students for the *HSTW* Assessment. He starts by randomly selecting 150 students in November and inviting them to a pep rally. He tells them they have been selected to participate in a special assessment. Each student at the pep rally completes a questionnaire requesting a commitment to participate. If they say yes, they are required to sign the commitment. A small minority of students decline to participate, but most agree. A random sample of 100 students is drawn from those who agree to take the test. The extra students who responded yes become alternates. After students are selected, a letter is sent home to parents congratulating them on their son or daughter being selected to take the assessment and explaining that it is an honor to represent the school.

### ***Options, Options, Options***

Suraci believes that providing students with options helps to build a sense of ownership of the assessment. The questionnaire students complete during the pep rally also asks them to choose one of several times to take the test. The first option is to take the assessment during New York State Regents week when most students are off or are taking only one Regents exam. In this case, the assessment is scheduled around their exams. The second option is on a Saturday from 9 a.m. until 3 p.m. Suraci states school leaders were pleasantly surprised when more than a third of their students selected this option. He notes that students who did so appreciated not having to miss class while still being able to enjoy the benefits that other participants received. The third option is the more traditional approach of using career/technical course time during the week for assessment administration over three days.

No matter what testing option students pick, Suraci provides breakfast and/or lunch for participating students. He even allows students to vote on the lunch vendor. Finally, students are given the option of selecting the reward they would like to receive for participation. The first option is a \$15 gift certificate to the mall; the second is driving and parking privileges to the career/technical center. In addition, students who select the Saturday option are given two extra make-up attendance days in accordance with the school

attendance policy. Upon completion of the assessment, all students receive a book of movie passes that were donated to the school by local merchants 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.

### ***The Fearless 100***

After the final sample of students has been selected to participate in the assessment, they are called together again and designated the "Fearless 100." Each student receives a "Fearless 100" button to wear and teachers hand out raffle tickets over a four-week period in the fall to students seen wearing their buttons. A drawing is held for prizes donated by local merchants. In addition to the buttons, participating students are further recognized for their participation during periodic PA announcements about the assessment thanking students for their effort. Finally, the state legislature was asked by the school to make a proclamation about student participation in the assessment. A copy of this official proclamation is given to assessment participants ensuring that they know they have performed a special service for their school.

### **Tip Four: *Ensure Your Faculty Knows the Purpose of the Assessment and Its Importance to Your School***

The schools that have been the most successful in getting students to take the assessments seriously are those whose faculties understand the importance of the test and the role it plays in school improvement efforts. This is because, as history teacher Penny Wells at Volney Rogers Middle School in Ohio puts it, "Teachers communicate the importance of the assessment to students in many significant, and seemingly insignificant, ways."

Janet Smalley, site coordinator of Walhalla High School in Walhalla, South Carolina, a member of the HSTW network for 18 years, believes that "If you have a culture of high expectations within your high school, then you set up an environment where any assessment is important and failure is not acceptable." Walhalla's administration, faculty and staff members have taken active roles in using assessment data to determine their school's weaknesses and strengths. Because they value the assessment, the assistant principals and guidance staff take the lead in administering it. "We want to send the message that if it's important enough for students to give us their time and effort, it's worth giving our time as well," Smalley said.

Sue Smith, a former director of career/technical education in West Virginia, agrees that communication with teachers is critical. According to Smith, "Administrators must think the assessment is important if they want teachers and students to take the test seriously." She has the principal meet with teachers and inform them of when the tests will be administered, a tactic she has found to be particularly successful with Advanced Placement teachers who were skeptical of the assessment in previous years. In meeting with teachers, it is important to discuss plans and guidelines for assigning make-up work. Principal Yates at Mercer County High School in Kentucky sends teachers advance reminders about the upcoming assessment via e-mail to let them know which students from their classes will be tested and asks teachers to be considerate about assignments during the assessment. He notes that students and parents of students who feel they are being penalized for missing class are not likely to be willing assessment participants.

## **Tip Five:** *Clearly Communicate the Purpose of the Assessment to Students and Their Parents*

To clearly communicate the purpose of the assessment to students and parents, administrators and teachers must clearly understand the purpose themselves as described in tip four. Once this has been accomplished there are a variety of methods for informing students.

At Talawanda High School in Oxford, Ohio, assessment coordinators hand deliver letters to randomly selected students informing them of their selection and inviting them to participate in the assessment. Their goal is to make the students feel that it is both an honor and a privilege to participate, and that they have a responsibility to do their best. Sample communications to students about the *HSTW* and Middle Grades Assessments can be found in the test description and sample question guides sent to sites by ETS. These materials are also available on the SREB Web site.

Some schools involve parents by sending letters to parents, or by including information and reminders about the assessment in their parent newsletters, e-mails and school calendars. Other sites ask students and parents to sign an agreement that students will participate and the students pledge to give their best effort. Consider each of these methods as you plan for the next assessment at your school.

## **Tip Six:** *Know What the Assessments Measure and Ensure All Students are Taught This Content*

The *HSTW* and Middle Grades Assessments are based on National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests in reading, mathematics and science. The length and content of each assessment are outlined below.

### ***Components of the HSTW Assessment***

- Reading:** The reading test is 90 minutes and is composed of multiple-choice and open-ended questions. It is designed to measure students' skills in reading in two areas: Reading to Gain Information and Reading to Perform a Task. Beyond 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.
- Mathematics:** The mathematics test is 66 minutes. The test consists of both multiple-choice and open-ended questions. It requires students to apply reasoning and analytical skills to solve a problem and to judge the reasonableness or correctness of a solution.

- Science:** The science test is 68 minutes and contains both multiple-choice and open-ended 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 requires 60 to 90 minutes to complete and is composed of questions about students' plans after graduation, high school courses taken, their views about teachers expectations of them and the availability of services, including extra help and career planning.

### ***Components of the Middle Grades Assessment***

- Reading:** The reading test is 75 minutes and contains multiple-choice and open-ended questions. It is designed to measure students' reading skills in two areas: Reading to Gain Information and Literary Experiences.
- Mathematics:** The mathematics test is 60 minutes and contains multiple-choice and open-ended questions. The assessment satisfies the standards developed by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. The questions are largely based on real-world problems one might encounter at home or at work and assess students' conceptual understanding, procedural knowledge and problem-solving abilities. Students who have completed their pre-algebra or first algebra course will do well on this examination.
- Science:** The science test is 60 minutes and contains multiple choice and open-ended questions. It assesses students' conceptual understanding, students' use of the tools and strategies of scientific investigation and practical reasoning/application skills. Content areas covered include the life sciences, physical sciences and Earth and space science.
- Student Survey:** The Student Survey requires 40 to 45 minutes to complete and is composed of questions about what teachers may have expected of students in the middle grades, the nature of what students were taught and asked to do and the level of effort they had to make to meet school standards. Additional questions pertain to student perceptions about instructional approaches used by teachers and student perceptions of what to expect in high school.

## **Tip Seven: *Prepare Students for Open-ended Test Items***

As many as 40 percent of students do not even attempt open-ended test questions on the reading assessments. In mathematics and science, the percentage of students who omit responses to open-ended questions is as high as 70 percent on some items. It is important to inform students that they should always attempt these items as it is possible to earn partial credit on them. Students will be more likely to attempt such questions if they encounter them routinely in their schoolwork.

Schools looking for examples of open-ended test questions in reading, mathematics and science may find the Test Description and Sample Question Guides particularly helpful. These guides are produced for each assessment by ETS and distributed with the packet of assessment preparation materials sent to each school. Schools may also find the sample questions provided through the NAEP data tool very useful as practice items for this assessment. Visit the National Center for Education Web site ([www.NCES.gov](http://www.NCES.gov)) for more information.

## **Tip Eight: *Have Teachers Complete the Transcript Section of the HSTW Student Survey***

While the Middle Grades Assessment only consists of one section, the *HSTW* student survey is divided into two sections. The first section takes 30 minutes to complete and asks a series of questions about the courses students will have completed by the end of high school. To complete the course experience section of the survey it is necessary to have both a copy of the students' transcript and the schedule of courses they expect to complete during the spring semester. The second section asks students about their experiences while at school and takes approximately 60 minutes.

Schools are given the option of having teachers or counselors complete the course experience section of the survey rather than having students do so. This is recommended for a variety of reasons. First, students are not likely to be as familiar with school transcripts as school staff are. Second, completing this section for them removes 30 minutes from the total time students spend on the *HSTW* Assessment. Finally, career centers that receive students from multiple feeder schools or districts may find that group administration of the course experience survey is quite complex as participating students have a variety of transcripts.



## **Tip Nine: *Publicize the HSTW Award of Educational Achievement***

Students who participate in the *HSTW* Assessment may earn the *HSTW* Award of Educational Achievement if they satisfy award criteria based on performance on the subject tests and completion of the *HSTW*-recommended curriculum. Joanne Miles, the *HSTW* district coordinator in Greensboro, North Carolina, motivates students and teachers by promoting the *HSTW* Award of Educational Achievement using brochures and other means. Students who earn this award are given different color cords to wear during their graduation ceremonies. She has also seen the benefits of good old-fashioned competition at the schools in her district. One school that had always come in second in the district on the assessment held a pep rally with its students. That year it came in first place!

For more information, review the *HSTW* Award of Educational Achievement Brochure, available on the SREB Web site ([www.sreb.org](http://www.sreb.org)).

Visit the SREB Web page ([www.sreb.org](http://www.sreb.org)) for the following resources and additional information on the *HSTW* and Middle Grades Assessments:

- *HSTW* Assessment Preparation Materials
- *HSTW* Assessment Test Description and Sample Question Booklet
- *HSTW* Award of Educational Achievement Brochure
- Middle Grades Assessment Preparation Materials
- Middle Grades Assessment Test Description and Sample Question Booklet

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