A six-pronged approach to prepare for the challenges of online standardized assessments can also help schools build a sustainable system for student achievement.

By Mark E. Shanoff
In 1983, when the National Commission on Excellence in Education published *A Nation at Risk*, a new era of accountability in education began. Back then, online assessments didn’t exist. Fast forward to 2014: Now, assessments have become the defining characteristic by which all student progress is judged. These measures of student ability must be scored quickly, prompting the move to administering these standardized assessments online.

As we transition to Common Core State Standards (CCSS), or the cadre of state-based college- and career-ready standards, principals must review the technical components of instruction as well as the implications of new standards. This includes how teaching is delivered, and especially, how learning is assessed. Schools must make technical and cultural shifts to be prepared for online assessments developed by the Smarter Balanced and PARCC consortia. These changes must simultaneously address computer-based testing and the assessments’ higher degree of difficulty.

While meeting the hardware and infrastructure requirements for administering such tests is the shared responsibility of school boards and states, schools are responsible for mastering six instructional shifts in order to ensure a smooth transition to online assessment. These shifts will demand more of principals, teachers, and students than ever before. They require a principal’s leadership to develop and execute.

**Shift #1:**

*Use released test items.*

One of the new standards’ major requirements is for students to develop deeper levels of understanding. Currently, teachers often plan for instruction using the lower levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy or Webb’s Depth of Knowledge. As teachers plan for instruction that prepares students for success in online assessments, higher level questioning, and the application of new knowledge, opportunities for students to practice their knowledge will be key.

Test item information for the new standards provided by states or testing consortia can help you and your teachers review the types of test questions. More importantly, this can expose teachers and students to the difficulty of the questions on the new online assessments.

Teachers have a responsibility to model their formative assessment questions on the question stems of released test items for new online assessments. Teachers, with their principals’ permission, have
become over-reliant on the assessments provided by publishers or instruments from years past.

**Shift #2:**
**Practice using an online testing platform.**
In sports, coaches prepare players by simulating game situations. In the military, officers prepare to lead their troops into battle with wartime simulation. Our students require the same level of preparation for online assessment. Does your school administer formative assessments online?

The more students practice on the devices they will be using to take their standardized assessment, the less likely they will be distracted by the novelty of taking an assessment—traditionally given with paper and pencil—on a computer. Schools and districts must ensure that formative assessments and practice tests are given on the same type of device, whether it is a laptop, desktop, or another device, that students will use for their online standardized assessment.

**Shift #3:**
**Use reference sheets.**
Reference sheets are common math standardized test tools. As students matriculate from the lower grades (K-4) to the higher grades (5-8), they need to become familiar with using the reference sheet, the same way that they should automatically know their basic math facts. Regular, purposeful practice and review of the math reference sheet associated with your online assessment will ensure that students use the reference sheet correctly, compartmentalize their use of it by associating certain question stems with certain formulas, and spend less time determining which formula on the reference sheet to use for a given problem.

If students haven’t been exposed to a reference sheet throughout the year, the presence of one on their online assessment can distract them and cost them valuable time when solving multi-step math problems.

Principals should ensure their teachers allow students to use the reference sheet on tests throughout the year. Consider this example: Most principals and experienced teachers didn’t grow up with the need to type. After repeated exposure to keyboarding, we developed speed and an automatic recognition of the location of keys and functions. The same tacit approach is required by teachers when planning their instruction about how to use the reference sheet. If teachers take a formative approach to familiarizing students with reference sheets, students will use them organically and productively.

**Shift #4:**
**Require academic vocabulary notebooks.**
Ask teachers to identify their students’ struggles and they will likely list vocabulary. Academic vocabulary must be treated like a priceless commodity. Teachers plan lessons with the intent of introducing new vocabulary and allowing students to apply it. But how do we ensure that students retain the skill to organically recall or generalize that new vocabulary?

The algorithms that score students’ answers on standardized online assessments will be programmed to spot the presence and application of certain academic vocabulary terms. For students to recall and properly use new vocabulary, those terms must be recorded, referenced, and reinforced.

A common place for students to record new vocabulary—such as a notebook—is paramount. If a teacher wants to ensure students practice using new vocabulary, those terms must be accessible and defined in the students’ own words. A beneficial step is standardizing your school’s approach to developing student academic vocabulary notebooks. This reinforces the importance of regular use of vocabulary and academic vocabulary notebooks as a resource.

Students’ frequent exposure to and study of academic vocabulary requires consistent, authentic feedback from teachers. This can be a powerful asset for the student to understand his or her own learning progression and for the teacher to determine the student’s level of understanding.

**Shift #5:**
**Collaborate on rubrics for answer construction.**
Principals must set the expectation for teachers to develop performance rubrics, or acceptable evidence that demonstrates mastery of the standard or deconstructed standard. Principals must also provide a vision for collaboration on the rubrics, time for teachers to collaborate, and high expectations for student performance. Students must be given regular opportunities to construct responses on the computer using simulated testing environments.

These rubrics must be shared with students prior to instruction, and the teachers’ feedback should be tied to that rubric. Teachers have a tendency to provide feedback for each student relative to their belief in that student’s abilities. When teachers provide feedback to all students based on the performance rubric, students are held...
The more students practice on the devices they will be using to take their standardized assessment, the less likely they will be distracted by the novelty of taking an assessment—traditionally given with paper and pencil—on a computer.

Shift #6: Develop student perseverance.
How often do we see students earn grades based on their work habits or social skills? Many students with poor executive function skills often find themselves academically hindered because of their poor organization or lack of perseverance. These may be students who are cognitively advanced or on par with their peers, but highly distracted, easily frustrated, and poorly organized.

As online assessment becomes the new norm across the country, expect to hear more about executive function skill development in elementary and middle grades. If we expect students to summarize, evaluate, synthesize, and predict, then we must help students to develop the organizational techniques and perseverance to solve problems, develop multiple solutions, defend answers, and evaluate claims.

We owe it to our students to mitigate the nonacademic factors that can hinder their performance on online tests. We must train students to persevere as if they are training for a marathon. As part of that “academic marathon” training, teachers must consider standardizing their organizational expectations in the classroom. For example, teachers should ensure that every student has a three-ring binder with one tab for each subject and that handouts are hole-punched and filed correctly; binder checks should become part of the daily schedule.

If you require students to maintain academic vocabulary notebooks, make sure there is consistency with how you want those entries to look. The principal should set that expectation. Do you want an in-context definition or dictionary definition of the term? Do you want examples, non-examples, or pictures?

Lastly, principals must ensure that teachers build in enough sustained time to complete complex tasks. Teachers can train students to persevere by allowing productive failure, feedback, and multiple tries. This safe environment will allow students to equate perseverance with personal safety.

Principals should consider assembling a team at their school site to create a plan for developing executive functioning and set expectations at each grade level. Many schools allow teachers to grade work habits and social skills on the report card. Now, more than ever, it behooves us to practice these skills in a formal, accountable learning structure. We may need to rewrite work habits to ensure that students develop the skills that will allow them to succeed, not only on the new online assessments, but also when organization and perseverance are called for in the workplace, in the home, on the battlefield, or in the college classroom.

A Sustainable System for Achievement
Principals and schools can treat standardized online assessments in one of two ways. We can be afraid of what lies ahead, continue with normal test preparation, and hope it works. Or, we can develop a new approach to building capacity in our teachers to prepare our students for the challenges of online assessments. Consider the six instructional shifts listed in this article—perhaps focusing on only one or two at a time—to build a sustainable system for student achievement in your school. These shifts can and should be embedded in normal, everyday instruction. They will improve instruction, increase learning, and set students on an achievement-driven trajectory.

Mark E. Shanoff is principal of Ocoee Middle School in Ocoee, Florida, and president of the Florida Association of Elementary and Middle School Principals.