

A BIG WIN FOR MONTANA STUDENTS



The Montana English Language Arts and Math Standards

In 2014, Montana's on-time high school graduation rate was 85%—higher than many other states—yet only 23% of the class of 2014 met the college-readiness benchmarks for the four areas tested on the ACT (English, reading, math, and science). On the 2013 Nation's Report Card (also known as the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP), less than half of Montana's 4th and 8th grade students demonstrated proficiency in reading and math.

The state's bar was set too low—although students were graduating high school, they did not have the skills they needed for success after graduation. Recognizing this disconnect, the State Board of Education adopted a set of college- and career-ready standards in 2011 in English language arts (ELA) and math to help ensure students were learning the skills most essential for college and careers.

According to a 2010 report by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, Montana's previous standards were among the worst in the nation. The ELA standards were "woefully deficient" and lacked benchmarks for what students should be able to achieve by the end of some grades; the math standards were broad and minimal, containing only eight standards per grade. On the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's 2007 *Leaders and Laggards* report, Montana's standards received a D in rigor.

With the adoption of higher standards, Montana is one step closer to ensuring that students have the opportunity to reach their full potential. By 2020, 63% of jobs in the state will require a postsecondary credential. However, only 36% of adults in Montana currently have such a credential, resulting in a 27% skills gap. Higher standards are essential to helping close this gap.

Montana's Proficiency Rates on the Nation's Report Card

Year	4th Math	4th Reading	8th Math	8th Reading
2011	45%	36%	46%	42%
2013	45%	35%	40%	40%



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Better Standards Deserve Better Assessments

Teachers across Montana have been hard at work preparing for the standards since their adoption. It has been a significant undertaking involving countless hours of professional development, curricula alignment, and learning strategies to engage students more deeply than ever before.

The next phase of this work is to implement an improved assessment that is more meaningful to students, teachers, and parents in determining which skills a student has or has not yet mastered. The state needs a test that can measure the critical thinking and problem solving skills that our students need to succeed—and existing state tests cannot evaluate this level of learning. Improved assessments present an opportunity to move beyond tests that simply measure rote memorization skills to ones that mirror the higher standards and provide teachers with valuable information on how effectively they are teaching and students are learning.

Putting better assessments in place needs to be part of a larger system of accountability that supports student achievement and holds schools accountable for successfully teaching the content outlined in the standards. At the heart of accountability is the need to ensure that all students across Montana receive a high-quality education. Meaningful tests serve as school-wide academic checkups that can identify struggling students and schools in need of extra support and interventions. In addition, improved assessments can identify high-achieving students who require support to maintain their academic engagement and provide them with the resources necessary to continue to excel.

For the past four years, teams of academics, testing experts, and teachers have been working tirelessly to create two testing options aligned to the higher standards: PARCC (Partnership for Assessment of

Readiness for College and Careers) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium. These two testing systems were field tested in spring 2014 in 35 states. Students in Montana participated in the Smarter Balanced field test.

The tests aim to do the following:

- Accurately measure student progress toward college and career readiness.
- Assess a wide range of skills, including critical thinking and writing.
- Provide real-time information on student progress to help guide teacher instruction and improve learning.

Montana is a governing member of the Smarter Balanced consortium. Students in grades 3–8 and 11 will take the Montana Smarter Assessments in ELA and math beginning in spring 2015. These tests include performance-based tasks that will challenge students to apply knowledge and skills to real-world problems that measure critical thinking, research, and analytical skills. The computer-adaptive tests will adjust the difficulty of questions throughout the assessments to quickly identify which skills students have mastered. Test results will provide a comprehensive report on classroom practices and student progress for teachers, administrators, students, and parents. The Smarter Balanced assessment system includes a Digital Library containing both formative assessments (which can be given to students during class to confirm their comprehension) and interim assessments (which can be given at the beginning and middle of the year to track progress leading up to the end-of-year summative assessments).

During this transition, it is important to advocate for key criteria that will make the state assessments a strong measuring stick of how Montana students are doing on the path to college and careers at the state and national levels. Leaders continue to be enthusiastic about the Montana Smarter Assessments because they meet so many of the criteria that make up a high-quality aligned test. As advocates, we need to ensure

that our state tests accurately measure college and career readiness and have these characteristics to serve as a useful tool to benefit students.

A High-Quality Assessment:

- Is developed with input from academic and testing experts, as well as teachers.
- Is field tested and reviewed before full implementation.
- Assesses a wide range of real-world skills using a variety of question formats.
- Includes formative or interim assessments that act as academic checkups to ensure that students are keeping pace.
- Provides detailed and timely feedback that sends an early warning signal to teachers if students are not on track so that interventions can be put in place.
- Is comparable across states.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is the difference between standards and curriculum?

- Standards are a set of guidelines for what students are expected to know and be able to do at specific points in their education. Standards provide the foundation for key components of the education system, including curricula, instructional materials, teacher training, and assessments.
- A curriculum is the course of study covering the standards. It is set by local school districts and includes the lesson plans, programs, and textbooks that teachers use to teach the content and skills outlined in the standards.

2. If students are learning with different curricula, how can they take the same test?

- Although teachers use different materials and curricula, students still learn the same skills outlined in the standards. Teachers can be creative in their instruction, designing lessons to best reach their students and establishing a classroom where all students can achieve.



The Montana English Language Arts and Math Standards:

- Are more rigorous academic standards that prepare all students for success after high school.
- Emphasize real-world skills, such as critical thinking and problem solving.
- Are comparable across states.

Better Assessments:

- Give us an honest, objective report of how our students are doing.
- Ensure all students are held to the same expectations.
- Identify struggling students so they can get the help they need.
- Identify high-achieving students to provide them with the resources necessary to continue to excel.

Smarter Balanced:

- A group of states working together to develop high-quality, computer-based assessments that measure college and career readiness in both math and English language arts.

3. Will the new test replace the old state test?

- Yes. The Montana Smarter Assessments will replace the Montana Comprehensive Assessment System (MontCas) in grades 3–8 and 11 in math and ELA in spring 2015.

4. Will annual test scores impact schools and districts?

- School-wide test results will be used as one measure for school accountability. Just as tests are used as academic checkups for individual students, they also serve as checkups for our schools. Districts need to identify struggling students and schools in need of support so that interventions can be put in place to ensure that all students across Montana receive a high-quality education.

5. How will test scores impact students?

- There are no testing requirements for graduation or promotion.

6. What kind of data will be collected? Will it be released?

- Under the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Montana is required to collect data on school performance. Aggregate data collected includes student test scores and information such as attendance, support services, and academic growth. *The state will not release any personally identifiable student information.* Only individuals who interact with students on a daily basis, such as teachers and parents, are allowed to see student-specific information.

- Federal law protects the privacy of student information and education records through the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). The only information that will be publicly available will contain aggregate data for schools, districts, and subgroups.

7. How were teachers involved in the test development process?

- Montana teachers participated in workgroups to address topics such as item development, formative assessment practices, leadership and professional learning, math assessment, accessibility to assessment, and technology.

8. Do students need to be computer literate?

- Students need to be computer literate. Paper and pencil versions will be available during the first three years of testing for schools that cannot meet the technology requirement.
- Although it may take time to ensure that every school has the hardware necessary and meets the technology requirements, this is a smart investment. Technology is not going away. Ensuring that all students, regardless of geography or household income, have equal access to technology is critical to preparing students for a 21st century competitive workforce.

9. Where can I go for more information?

- www.smarterbalanced.org
- www.opi.mt.gov/curriculum/MontCAS
- www.BusinessForCore.org

