

Common Core Assessments: Frequently Asked Questions



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1. Why are we developing new assessments?

As states continue to implement common standards for what students need to know to be prepared for college and career, many are also working to develop shared assessments to measure progress against these goals. Just as the workplace is demanding different skills from its employees, the standards expect more of our students. The assessments help teachers track how students are doing and where they need additional support and capitalize on new technology that plays an increasingly important role in how students learn.

2. Why would it be advantageous to develop assessments with a number of states, instead of each state developing its own assessments?

There are distinct advantages and economies of scale when states share an assessments system. Students are not only measured alongside peers in their state, but also alongside students throughout the country, ensuring that no matter where students live they are gaining equally challenging knowledge and skills in each grade level. With shared assessments, teachers and school districts can more broadly share information about curricula and teaching methods they have developed to improve learning gains, interim test questions, best practices for test administration, and more—which also saves money. This is why a majority of states have joined one of two consortia—PARCC and Smarter Balanced—which are developing shared assessments based on the Common Core State Standards.

3. What is a testing consortium?

The two testing consortia—the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (Smarter Balanced)—are groups of member states who are committed to the development and use of next-generation assessments aligned to the Common Core State Standards. Each consortium takes its own approach to test development, implementation, and rollout, resulting in different kinds

Common Core Assessments Myths vs. Facts

Myth: The federal government will use the new assessments to collect and analyze students' private data and information.

FACT: As with all previous tests, data is collected, stored, and used to help track student progress at each state's discretion. States retain control over student information, and federal law prohibits the creation of a federal database with students' personally identifiable information. Any recommended data collection adheres to all federal and state privacy laws, including but not limited to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).

Myth: Students are already required to take so many tests. These new assessments will mean even more testing.

FACT: The new assessments will replace current tests. The number of tests offered is still up to states and school districts. The new assessments are designed to be a flexible system that helps teachers and schools measure students' progress throughout the year. This helps teachers better understand where students start, gain timely information to improve their instruction, and measure students' growth and achievement at the end of each school year.

Myth: Student scores on the new assessments are going to drop and we're only setting up our students to fail.

FACT: The new assessments replace existing tests and provide an "academic checkup" for students, parents, and educators by measuring real-world skills, such as critical thinking and problem solving. The assessments set a realistic baseline that more accurately reflects students' true knowledge and skill set, and help students avoid needing remediation by improving educational and workforce outcomes.



of test questions. Member states work collaboratively with educators, researchers, higher education faculty, policymakers, and community groups on the development of these tests, and will be replacing their states' existing assessments with the new ones, making testing consistent throughout the consortium. The consortium's activities are funded by the member states and by both public and private grants.

4. What is better about the new assessments?

First off, we're moving away from a system of fill-in-the-bubble, multiple choice tests. Students will have the opportunity to show their work, explain their answers, and truly demonstrate mastery of the content—in a way that has not been done before. The new assessments are designed to accurately measure students' progress towards college- and career-readiness, giving teachers, parents, and students the information they need to get on track and stay on track. Like the Common Core, the new assessments are vertically aligned—meaning they connect learning within and across grades so that students build new understanding onto foundations created in previous years. Since the assessments provide better and more timely information about student progress, teachers and parents will be better positioned to help students improve. Specifically, unlike most state tests which are being phased out and only provide a percentile for where a student is performing in comparison to their peers, the new tests will better illustrate students' weaknesses and strengths on needed knowledge and skills. The new assessments also make full use of the computer technology that students use in the classroom and will continue to rely on in college and in their careers. The assessments better test critical thinking, problem solving, and the integration of knowledge by offering more complex tasks and asking students to provide evidence or support for their answers—which means no more guessing a multiple choice response and moving on.

5. What if my state isn't part of PARCC or Smarter Balanced?

States have a number of options when it comes to assessing students' progress towards meeting the Common Core. States not participating in PARCC or Smarter Balanced may choose to revamp their existing state tests or use the ACT Aspire test. The important thing is to investigate how closely your state's new tests align to the standards, and whether students are asked to demonstrate writing and analysis. Several organizations have developed resources to help policymakers evaluate their options, including SCOPE at Stanford; the Alliance for Excellent Education; and the Council of Chief State School Officers.

6. What is ACT Aspire?

ACT, Inc.—a private testing company—partnered with Pearson to develop new assessments aligned to the Common Core. Alabama has adopted ACT Aspire, and other states have indicated that they are considering adopting the assessment. PARCC, Smarter Balanced, and ACT Aspire assessment systems include some similar features, costs, assessment types, grade levels, subjects, and timelines, but important details, including planned writing and performance tasks, differ. Some states may also consider using an assessment created by the consortia for elementary and middle grades and then use ACT Aspire for the high school assessment.

7. Aren't these assessments funded by the federal government?

Both PARCC and Smarter Balanced are currently supported by funds from the U.S. Department of Education, which go towards research and development. However, all policy decisions about the structure and content of the assessments are made by the member states. Once the federal grants have wrapped up in 2015, each consortium will have the option to either be fully funded and supported by member states or to apply for additional grant support from private and/or government sources.



8. Is my student being exposed to commercialism or product placement through these new assessments?

In the new assessments, there is a focus on providing students with authentic passages that reflect the kind of reading, understanding, and problem solving they'll be required to do in college or in their careers. Test-takers will inevitably be reading about familiar people, places, historical events, products, and even brands, which are noted according to publishing guidelines for trademarks. Test creators are in no way compensated for their references to familiar items.

9. Don't these tests promote more "drill and kill"?

The new assessments are designed to test students' mastery of core knowledge and skills, including critical thinking and problem solving—not rote memorization. Test questions have therefore moved away from traditional multiple choice responses and ask students to support their work, to provide evidence and rationale for their responses to both math and writing tasks, and to solve multiple equations that build on each other. The resulting test will help teachers see how well students understand key concepts, not just how well they were able to cram for one test.

10. What if my state/school district can't afford the new assessments?

Timely information about student achievement is worth the investment. Without it, we lack the ability to make informed decisions about our schools. The new assessment consortia are leveraging the purchasing power of multi-state networks to produce high-quality assessments that few states could afford on their own. To further ease the burden on schools and school districts, the consortia tests are designed to be comparable to what states are already spending on assessments and are administered using the technology and systems in place in most school districts. Over the years of implementation, PARCC and Smarter Balanced costs actually will decrease, thanks to the technology component of the exam. The Brookings Institution has additional information about the cost-benefits of state consortia and possible shifts in cost from what states currently spend.

	PARCC	Smarter Balanced	ACT Aspire
Estimated Per-Student Cost (current state avg. \$27)	\$29.50 summative only (math and ELA/literacy, including writing)	\$22.50 summative only (math and ELA/literacy, including writing) \$27.30 including interim and formative	\$21.00 for one subject \$1.00 additional per subject (\$24.00 for math, English, reading and writing)

Sources: Matthew M. Chingos, Standardized Testing and the Common Core Standards: You Get What You Pay For? (2013), <http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2013/10/30-standardized-testing-and-the-common-core-chingos>; Chingos, Strength in Numbers: State Spending on K-12 Assessment Systems (2012), <http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2012/11/29-cost-of-ed-assessment-chingos>

11. How much will implementation cost in my state if we do not currently have the necessary technology or broadband?

Technology is an integral part of our modern world, and most schools have already integrated it into classrooms, providing at least computers and broadband access. The tests are designed so they can be offered on the computers that exist in most schools today. For states that are completely new to online testing and do not feel properly equipped, there will be a paper-and-pen option for the first few years of rollout.



12. How were teachers involved in developing the new assessments?

Thousands of K-12 educators and hundreds of faculty from state colleges and universities—a much greater number than were involved in developing most prior state tests—worked together from across every state involved in PARCC and Smarter Balanced to develop the most appropriate test questions for each subject and grade.

13. What resources are available to support teachers' instruction?

To aid teachers, Smarter Balanced is building a “Digital Library” that will give teachers access to online training modules, example units, and teacher-submitted resources. These tools are designed to show educators strategies and practices to enhance day-to-day instruction. Similarly, PARCC is developing an online site that will provide teachers with model lessons to help them plan instruction and use formative assessment tools to maximize their use of the test results. In addition, both PARCC and Smarter Balanced require students to write extensively, explain their thinking, and solve multi-step problems. Since teachers can assess their students' learning throughout the year, they can gain important information that can be used to develop creative lessons and identify effective instructional approaches.

14. What benefits will parents, teachers, and students receive from the new assessments?

As those of us who work in business know, we constantly need to monitor and measure progress towards our goals. This helps us stay on track and make important adjustments that will give us better results. The new assessments do the same thing, giving schools, teachers, parents, and students information on where students are and where they could use additional support to meet college-and career-ready standards.

With these new assessments, **teachers and schools** will get timely information throughout the year on their students' progress and professional development resources that will help them adjust instruction. They also have the flexibility to select the number and kinds of assessments they offer throughout the year to best support their students' success. The new assessments utilize computer-based testing, which is more interactive, efficient, and aligned with how students use technology. **Parents** will also benefit from these new assessments, receiving information from their children's teachers on areas of strength and opportunities for improvement. Finally, **students** will be held accountable not for what they've learned specifically for the test, but for the important knowledge and skills they have mastered over the course of their education and that put them on track to graduate college-and career ready. They will be offered engaging problems using technology they are familiar with, be held to the high standards that will put them on a path to success, and will get the support they need to improve.

