

A BIG WIN FOR CONNECTICUT STUDENTS



The Connecticut Core Standards

In 2013, Connecticut's on-time high school graduation rate was 80%—comparable to many other states. Yet on the Nation's Report Card (also known as the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP), only half of that year's graduating class demonstrated proficiency in reading and less than one-third were proficient in math. Younger students also struggled, as less than half of 4th and 8th graders demonstrated proficiency in reading and math.

The NAEP results showed that while many students were graduating from high school, not all of those graduates were prepared for

college, making them less likely to earn a degree if they enrolled in higher education. Among members of the class of 2007, 70% enrolled in college immediately after high school, but only 46% had earned a degree by 2013. In 2012, 61% of students attending Connecticut's two-year colleges and 32% of students at the state's four-year universities had to take a remedial class because they lacked the skills for college-level work. To address these disconnects, in 2010, the Connecticut Board of Education adopted a set of college- and career-ready standards in English language arts (ELA) and math to help ensure students gain the skills most essential for college and the workforce.

Connecticut's previous academic standards did not provide students with the skills they needed for successful futures. According to a report by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, the math standards for high school were particularly poor and lacked much of the most essential material. On the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's 2007 *Leaders and Laggards* report, Connecticut's standards received a D because they lacked the rigor necessary to prepare students for college-level work.

With the adoption of higher standards, Connecticut is one step closer to ensuring that students will have the opportunity to reach their full potential. By 2020, 67% of jobs in the state will require a postsecondary credential. However, only 46% of adults in the state currently have such a credential, resulting in a 21% skills gap. Higher standards are essential to helping close this gap.

Connecticut's Proficiency Performance on the Nation's Report Card

Year	4th Math	4th Reading	8th Math	8th Reading	12th Math	12th Reading
2011	45%	42%	38%	45%	NA	NA
2013	45%	43%	37%	45%	32%	32%



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Better Standards Deserve Better Assessments

Teachers across Connecticut overwhelmingly support the standards. In a 2014 survey of teachers in the state, 73% were enthusiastic about implementing the standards. They have been hard at work putting these higher academic goals in place 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 test 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. Connecticut is currently in the process of revising and improving its accountability system, with the goal of ensuring that all students across the state receive the same high-quality education. Meaningful tests serve as school-wide academic checkups that can identify struggling students and schools in need of extra support so interventions can be put in place. 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 help them excel.

Higher standards created a need for equally high-quality aligned state assessments. Two multi-state consortia were formed to develop assessments in math and ELA that were aligned to the Common Core standards: PARCC (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium. Connecticut has been a member of the Smarter Balanced consortium since 2010. These consortia included teams of academics, testing experts, and teachers who have been working tirelessly over the past four years to create improved, aligned tests. The two assessment systems were field tested in spring 2014 in 35 states, including Connecticut, where students took the Smarter Balanced tests.

The test aims to do the following:

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

These high-quality, computer-adaptive tests (CAT) will be given to students in grades 3–8 and 11 in spring 2015. The difficulty of questions is adjusted based on a student's responses, so it measures a greater range and depth of content and provides a more accurate measure of progress. The tests were specifically designed to help teachers and parents know how students are progressing and provide important feedback on what students have mastered and where they are struggling. The Smarter Balanced assessments are a significant upgrade from the previous tests and measure more than just the skills that can be evaluated with multiple choice questions. The Smarter Balanced system also comes with a Digital Library that includes classroom activities and short formative assessments that are aligned to the standards. These activities serve as academic checkups so that teachers can measure progress throughout the year and provide more support and challenges whenever students need them.

During this transition, it is important to advocate for key criteria that will make the state assessments a strong measuring stick of how Connecticut students are doing on the path to college and careers at the state and national levels. Leaders continue to be enthusiastic about the Smarter Balanced assessments because they meet so many of the criteria that make up a high-quality aligned test. As advocates, we need to ensure that the state assessments 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.
- Provides detailed and timely feedback that acts as an academic checkup.
- 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? Is the Common Core a 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.
- The Common Core State Standards are *not* a curriculum. They do not determine how teachers deliver content to their students or what materials teachers must use to do so.



The Connecticut Core Standards:

- Provide clear expectations of what a student should know and be able to do at each grade level.
- Prepare students to meet the demands of the 21st century.
- Are comparable across states.

Better Assessments:

- Give 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-adaptive assessments that measure college and career readiness in both math and English language arts.

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.
- Additionally, the standards encourage teachers to dive deeper into key concepts, so that kids work beyond memorization and instead communicate the thinking behind their answers.

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

- Yes. The Smarter Balanced tests will replace the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) in grades 3–8 and the Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT) in grade 11.
- About 90% of school districts in the state administered the Smarter Balanced field test in 2014. In spring 2015, all districts will administer the Smarter Balanced tests.

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 extra support so that interventions can be put in place to ensure that all students across Connecticut will receive a high-quality education.

5. How will test scores impact teachers?

- Scores from the Smarter Balanced assessments will eventually be used as a measure in the teacher evaluation system. The state is seeking to extend their waiver from including the test scores for another year. It is not clear how soon student testing results will be included in the evaluation system.

6. How will test scores impact students?

- There are no testing requirements related to promotion or graduation.

7. What kind of professional development did teachers receive in preparation for the standards and tests?

- Connecticut's Department of Education began working on suggested ELA and mathematics curricula with content experts—as well as the professional

development planning—in 2010. Some districts began their curriculum writing in 2011, while others waited until 2012, and the process continued well into 2014. The state continues to hold professional development opportunities on standards and assessments for teachers across the state.

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

- Under the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Connecticut 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 and state 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.

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

- Connecticut teachers reviewed test questions for content, bias/sensitivity, and accessibility and assisted with the development of learning resources in the Digital Library, an online collection of aligned resources to support teachers as they adjust to teaching the standards.

10. Do students need to be computer literate?

- The Smarter Balanced assessments are completely computer-based, so students need to be computer literate.
- 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.

11. Where can I go for more information?

- www.smarterbalanced.org
- www.ctcorestandards.org
- www.conncan.org
- www.BusinessForCore.org