

A BIG WIN FOR IOWA STUDENTS



The Iowa Core

In 2010, Iowa's on-time graduation rate was 89%—one of the highest in the nation—and more than 60% of 4th and 8th graders achieved proficiency in reading and math on the state assessments. Unfortunately, the Nation's Report Card (also known as the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP) told a different story. Less than half of students in the 4th and 8th grades demonstrated proficiency on the NAEP reading and math tests. The state's bar was set too low—although students were graduating high school and achieving proficiency on state assessments, they were not mastering the skills needed for college and careers. To address this disconnect, in 2010 the State Board of Education adopted a set of college- and career-ready standards in English language arts (ELA) and math to help ensure students were learning the most essential skills.

Additionally, in 2011, Iowa transitioned from the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) and the Iowa Tests of Educational Development (ITED) to the Iowa Assessments, which were under development during the adoption of the new standards.

According to a 2010 report by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, Iowa's previous academic standards did not prioritize the most important skills and lacked much of the most critical content for students to learn. The former ELA standards contained almost no rigorous expectations at the high school level and were among the worst in the country.

With the adoption of higher standards, Iowa is one step closer to ensuring that students will have the opportunity to reach their full potential. By 2020, 64% of jobs in the state will require a postsecondary credential. However, only 46% of adults in Iowa currently have such a credential, resulting in an 18% skills gap. Higher standards are essential to helping close this gap.

Iowa's Proficiency Rates
on the 2013 Nation's Report Card and
on the 2010 and 2013 Iowa Assessments

Assessment	4th Math	4th Reading	8th Math	8th Reading
NAEP	37%	26%	35%	31%
ITBS 2010	37%	27%	33%	31%
Iowa Assessments 2013	79%	75%	75%	75%



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Better Standards Need Better Assessments

Teachers across Iowa 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 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 Iowa 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 tests were field tested in spring 2014 in 35 states. In Iowa, about 6,800 students took the Smarter Balanced field test.

These 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.

Iowa was originally a member of the Smarter Balanced consortium but withdrew in 2014 while an appointed task force worked to consider options for a state test that would be the best fit for Iowa. Students in grades 3–11 are projected to take the newly adopted assessments in spring 2017. The assessment task force delivered a recommendation to the state legislature in January 2015 that Iowa should adopt the Smarter Balanced assessments. However the final decision about a new state assessment has not yet been made.

During this transition, it is important to advocate for key criteria that will make the state assessments a strong measuring stick of how Iowa students are doing on the path to college and careers at the state and national levels. 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.

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

- Yes. Ideally, either the Next Generation Iowa Assessments or the Smarter Balanced Assessments will be adopted to replace the current version of the Iowa Assessments.



The Iowa Core:

- Is a set of 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 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.

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 Iowa receive a high-quality education.

5. How will test scores impact students?

- Beginning in spring 2017, students in the 3rd grade will need to meet a minimum score on the 3rd grade reading assessment and other indicators in order to be promoted to the 4th grade.

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

- Under the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Iowa 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?

- Iowa teachers participated in item development and review for both the Next Generation Iowa Assessments and the Smarter Balanced Assessments.

8. Do students need to be computer literate?

- Currently, the Iowa Assessments are administered with paper and pencil. The Next Generation Iowa Assessments are planned to be either online or paper and pencil, while the Smarter Balanced Assessments will be administered online. Students will need to be computer literate.

9. Where can I go for more information?

- www.educateiowa.gov/student-assessment
- www.smarterbalanced.org
- www.BusinessforCore.org

