

A BIG WIN FOR MINNESOTA STUDENTS



The Minnesota K–12 Academic Standards

In 2014, Minnesota’s on-time high school graduation rate was 81%—an all-time high and a 5% improvement from four years prior. Despite this encouraging progress, achievement gaps between white students and students of color are some of the largest in the nation. That same year, only 60% of African-American students and 51% of American Indian students graduated on time.

As evidenced on the 2007 Nation’s Report Card, also known as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), many 4th and 8th grade students, especially those of color, failed to demonstrate proficiency in math and reading. These scores improved only marginally from 2007 to 2013. In 2014,

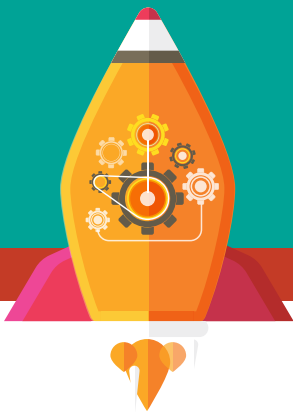
28% of Minnesota high school graduates who enrolled in postsecondary education had to take a remedial course because they lacked the skills needed for college-level work.

The state has implemented multiple efforts to better support all students on the path from high school to college and careers. In 2007, the Minnesota K–12 Academic Standards in mathematics were revised to focus on the skills students needed for success after high school. According to a 2010 report by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, the improved math standards were described as well-organized and strong. In the same year as the Fordham Institute report, the State Department of Education revised the English language arts (ELA) standards to match the rigorous math standards by adopting the Common Core State Standards in ELA. The Fordham Institute assessed the state’s previous English standards as lacking as much as 35% of the most critical content—making the transition to the Common Core an essential move in the right direction.

With the adoption of these higher standards in math, and soon after in ELA, Minnesota came one step closer to ensuring that students will have the opportunity to reach their full potential. By 2020, at least 70% of jobs in the state will require a postsecondary credential. However, only 48% of adults currently have such a credential, resulting in a significant skills gap. Higher standards are essential to raising student achievement and helping close this gap.

Minnesota’s Proficiency Performance on the Nation’s Report Card

Year	4th Math	4th Reading	8th Math	8th Reading
2007	51%	37%	43%	37%
2013	59%	41%	47%	41%



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Better Standards Need Better Assessments

Teachers across Minnesota have been hard at work putting these higher standards in place. It has been a significant undertaking involving many hours of professional development, collaboration, and learning strategies to engage students more deeply than ever before.

Following the adoption of higher standards, Minnesota's next step was 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. 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.

Better assessments play a key role in improving student achievement and holding Minnesota 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 Minnesota 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, Minnesota has administered state-specific assessments aligned to their higher standards: the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCAs). Students in grades 3–8 take MCAs every spring in reading and math. In high school, students also take a reading test in grade 10 and a math test in grade 11. The improved MCAs provide information that can be used to inform

teacher instruction and improve learning. Teachers use results to identify areas where a student needs improvement or excels, so that they can provide additional support or challenges. Beginning in spring 2015, students in grades 8, 10, and 11 will also take the ACT assessments. These assessments measure college readiness in reading, English, math, and science. Both the MCAs and ACT serve as academic checkups to let parents and teachers know whether a student is on track to graduate prepared for college and careers.

It is important to advocate for key criteria that will make the state assessments a strong measuring stick of how Minnesota students are doing on the path to college and careers. Leaders continue to be enthusiastic about the MCAs and ACT assessments because they meet the criteria of 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.

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 test scores impact schools and districts?

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

4. How will test scores impact students?

- There are currently no testing requirements for graduation or grade promotion. Beginning in 2016, students will be required to take the ACT Plus Writing test to graduate.



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.

5. What kind of professional development did teachers receive in preparation for the standards?

- The Minnesota Department of Education developed an online standards implementation toolkit with resources for districts and schools to assist them during the transition to the Common Core ELA standards, from the planning phase to full implementation.

6. What kind of data is collected? Is it released?

- Under the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Minnesota 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 are teachers involved in the test development process?

- Teachers participate in the stakeholder advisory groups, which provide feedback on passages and items on the MCAs.

8. Do students need to be computer literate?

- Yes. At every grade level, the MCAs are administered online only. Paper and pencil accommodations are only available for students who require them.

9. Where can I go for more information?

- www.education.state.mn.us/MDE/JustParent/TestReq/index.html
- www.BusinessForCore.org

