

Common Core State Standards & Aligned Assessments: Frequently Asked Questions

We are moving away from fill-in-the-bubble tests!

For years, most year-end tests were mainly multiple-choice exams that focused on basic skills. These tests did a poor job of measuring the skills students need for success after high school—like writing, critical thinking, and problem solving. With new education standards, states are working together to develop quality tests. In 2014-15, schools will replace their old tests with new assessments built to let parents and teachers know how well students are learning the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in today's world.

What are the Common Core State Standards?

The Common Core State Standards are academic benchmarks developed by leading educators at the prompting of state governors and others to ensure college- and career readiness for every student. The standards make clear what students are expected to know and master by the end of each grade level, providing clarity and consistency for the first time among a broad network of states, the District of Columbia, U.S. Department of Defense Education Activity, and U.S. territories.

The federal government had no role in developing the standards, which came about through a partnership between the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers. Other supporting partners include National PTA, the National Association of State Boards of Education, the Alliance for Excellent Education, the American Association of School Administrators, The James B. Hunt, Jr. Institute, the Business Roundtable, Achieve, ACT, and the College Board.

How are the Common Core standards different from previous academic standards?

In 2002, No Child Left Behind was enacted into federal law. It mandated that every state implement a standards-based accountability system to ensure student proficiency – as defined by each state – in reading and English-Language Arts, and mathematics by the 2013-2014 school year. The patchwork of standards created by 50 different states, though, called into question what “proficient” meant. The Common Core standards, though, were developed from the best standards that already existed in the country, based on evidence and expertise about educational outcomes. While No Child Left Behind did not address the quality of academic standards, the Common Core places an enormous emphasis on the rigor of these benchmarks to ensure that students are, in fact, learning according to the best methods and practices available.

Is the Common Core a government takeover of education?

Absolutely not. There was some confusion created when the federal Department of Education allowed states to use Race to the Top funds to implement the Common Core standards, but the federal government had no role in the development of the standards and did not take any actions to order or require states adopt the Common Core. In fact, the Common Core stresses local control over education: it is up to the discretion of state education officials, school district officials, school boards, principals, teachers and other educators to decide how best to implement the standards in their schools.

What kind of data is the federal government compiling on my child through these new standards?

None. The Common Core is not a mechanism for federal data collection. In fact, the two entities that make up the standards-aligned testing consortia (PARCC: Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers; and SBAC: Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium) are prohibited from sharing data with the federal government. Confusion over this likely stems from the National Education Data Model, which is a framework describing the types of data that individual school districts and state may choose to collect. But in fact, federal law prohibits the reporting of aggregate data that could identify individual students and the federal government does not have access to student-level information held in state databases.

Does the Common Core tell teachers how to run their classrooms?

Again, no. The Common Core standards are simply academic benchmarks for what students should know by the end of each grade level. Teachers remain in control of what happens in their classrooms through their lesson planning. The Common Core actually gives teachers more flexibility in developing their lesson plans because it decreases the number of items being taught while increasing the depth of knowledge students receive. This is referred to as “fewer, deeper” – fewer items, deeper mastery and understanding.

Why am I seeing textbooks stamped with “Common Core State Standards”?

Just as the Common Core does not tell teachers how to run their classrooms, it does not mandate the use of certain texts. Individual school districts select the textbooks their schools will use, and some textbook publishers have chosen on their own to label their textbooks as being aligned with the standards.

Does the Common Core remove fiction and literature from schools? And why are science teachers instructing students in reading?

First, the Common Core encourages English-Language Arts to use a variety of texts in their instruction, including works of fiction, classics of American literature, and informative, non-fiction texts such as newspapers. The goal of the standards is to increase the reading ability of students as they progress through school so they are fully prepared for the complex and higher-level reading they will encounter in college and the workplace. Second, reading comprehension is required in all classes, not just English, so teachers of other subjects are encouraged to ensure that students' reading comprehension is progressing on grade level.

Why are there new tests required, and how much time will be spent taking those tests?

As states implement the new standards, they are transitioning to new tests designed to measure whether students are on-track for college- and career readiness. As part of this process, most states chose to join one of two testing consortia – PARCC or Smarter Balanced – and use the new tests developed by them so that, for the first time, there will be comparable student achievement results available from state to state. This is important so that we know that a high school diploma earned in Wisconsin means the same level of academic achievement as one earned in Nevada or Maryland or Georgia.

My child is not familiar with these new tests -- will scores drop and will that mean my child is failing?

First, it is important to understand that comparing these new assessments to previous tests is like comparing apples to oranges. The old tests made sure that students were ready to proceed to the next grade level; the new ones ensure they are on-track for college and career readiness. Second, the PARCC and Smarter Balanced assessments are aligned to the Common Core standards so if your child is on-track in his or her classroom learning and mastering the materials being taught, he or she will be prepared for the new tests.

Are teachers teaching to the test?

Absolutely not. Teachers create their lessons plans according based on the Common Core standards. The new tests are aligned with the standards. Good instruction from your child's teachers will prepare them for the test.

How long will these new tests take?

The PARCC and Smarter Balanced assessments were designed with students in mind. The developers understand that third-grade students cannot sit for the same amount of time that eighth graders. The tests are broken up into sections that are age- and developmentally appropriate.

Does my school have adequate technology to conduct the new assessments?

The biggest hurdle that some schools will face is acquiring adequate technology and bandwidth to accommodate the new electronic testing. States still have five years to make this transition, as assessments will be available in the traditional "paper and pencil" format for three years following implementation in the 2014-15 school year. According to experts, an average middle school can successfully conduct electronic assessments with one lab containing 30 computers. Most likely, your child's teachers have been taking them to your school's computer lab to make sure they are comfortable with the technology that will be used on the tests.