



Common Core and Smarter Balanced Assessments

The Common Core State Standards and the Smarter Balanced Assessment are an upgrade to the standards and assessments the state has used for over the last decade. By making substantive improvements they represent standards and assessments version 2.0.

Common Core – the Basics

Setting Expectations for Student Outcomes. Academic standards establish expectations for what students are expected to learn at each grade level. What happens in the classroom (curriculum) is left up to teachers and local districts, who determine how best to help students reach those expectations.

Building on an Old System. California adopted a standards-based accountability system –standards, assessments, and accountability – in the 1990's. A lot has been learned since then, and state policymakers were debating the best method to update the standards. At the same time, a multi-state effort began to develop what became the Common Core Standards in mathematics and English Language Arts. California policymakers determined that these standards addressed some of the key shortcomings with the old California standards, and adopted the Common Core in 2010.

Governors' and State Superintendents' Organizations Drove their Development. The Common Core standards were developed by the National Governor's Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) in collaboration with state officials, teachers, parents and other interested parties across the country to develop model standards in math and English for states to consider. NGA and CCSSO created standards that prepare students for college and career, and were internationally benchmarked. Throughout the drafting process, NGA and CCSSO relied on teachers and standards experts from across the country. Each state voluntarily adopted the standards.

Common Core Standards Improve Upon Old Standards. In California, the old standards were considered rigorous, but were also known for being “a mile wide and an inch deep” meaning they covered a lot of different elements, but didn't provide enough opportunity to understand and explore

Focus of the New Standards

The standards-writers sought to create standards that are:

- Aligned with college and work expectations;
- Include rigorous content and application of knowledge through high-order skills including critical thinking and problem solving;
- Build upon strengths and lessons of previous state standards;
- Informed by top-performing countries, so that all students are prepared to succeed in our global economy and society;
- Evidence and/or research-based; and
- Establish what students need to learn, but not dictate how teachers should teach.

them deeply. This led to districts providing curriculums that overemphasized the rote memorization of basic skills. In contrast, the Common Core standards are fewer, clearer, and deeper than our old standards. The standards define the knowledge and skills in math and English language arts/literacy that students need to be ready to succeed in entry-level credit-bearing college coursework and the high-skill workforce.

Smarter Balanced – New Standards Require a New Approach to Assessments

Why We Have Tests. Tests administered near the end of the school year help educators and parent know if students understanding what they are supposed to be learning. Annual tests provide information needed to ensure students don't fall further and further behind if they are struggling. Every year is a new opportunity to help a student make progress.

New Standards Require New Approach to Testing. While fill in the bubble tests may have been sufficient at measuring student achievement for the old standards, the Common Core standards focus on deeper learning and critical thinking skills, and thus require a new approach to assessments. Because students will use technology devices such as computers or tablets to take the tests, there are many improvements that mirror the improvements in the standards themselves. In addition to multiple choice questions, the new assessment adds short response and extended response questions which require high order skills. It also adds performance tasks that allow students to complete an in-depth project that demonstrates analytical skills and real-world problem solving.

Smarter Balanced Designed by Consortium of States. Two assessment consortia are designing tests of the Common Core standards. California joined the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) which includes 22 states. California is a lead partner in setting the policies for the Consortium.

Basics of the New Assessment

- Almost all students¹ in grades 3-8 and grade 11 will take the assessment.
- Will test students in math and English language arts, but not science or social science (new science standards have been adopted by the state, but there is not yet an assessment of those standards).
- Assessments will be administered electronically allowing for new testing formats.
- All components of the test will take between 7-8 ½ hours per grade and will be administered over several days.
- Spring 2014 will be a practice year to evaluate the test and the process to administer the test. Students will take a shorten version of each test and no student or school reports will be provided for the practice year.
- A full administration will be offered in Spring 2015;
- Some California teachers will be involved in grading performance standards and extended response questions.

Smarter Balance Assessments Makes Additional Improvements. In addition to measuring deeper learning skills through short and extended response questions, and a performance task, the new assessments include several other innovations that will provide better informations to teachers and parents, school and district leaders and the broader community in a more timely fashion. Specifically:

¹ A very small percentage of students with severe special needs will take an alternative assessment.

- Results will accurately measure student growth from year-to-year.
- Electronic administration of the test will allow a broader variety of content than the old paper and pencil tests.
- Computer adaptive technology testing will allow results to be more accurate with fewer questions.
- Results will be available sooner, which supports differentiated instruction.
- Interim assessments aligned to the test will also be provided to allow teachers to assess students' understanding of the material throughout the year.
- Results will be comparable to other states to allow Californians to benchmark their students' scores more accurately against other students across the country.

Expect Some Challenges with the Spring Administration. In most schools across the state, expect the testing of the test to go smoothly this spring. However, this practice test is intended to identify insufficiencies in the infrastructure, so there will likely be some glitches. In particular, we expect some school districts to need to make technology investments and upgrades prior to the full administration of the test in Spring 2015. Unfortunately, one of the impacts of the multi-year recession was an under investment in education technology. The \$1.25 billion provided in the 2013-14 budget plus any additional funding provided in the 2014-15 will allow districts to make the investments necessary to successfully administer the assessment in Spring 2015.

Spring 2014

Trial Run for the Test, the State and the Schools

The Smarter Balance assessment is in the final stages of development, the full administration of the assessment will not be ready until Spring 2015. Because the new tests are designed to do more than the previous state tests, they require more to administer to students particularly with regard to technology infrastructure. The 2014 test will help everyone get ready for Spring 2015, without having students taking tests on the previous standards. The state will administer a practice test in all schools that will:

- “Test the test” to ensure the all the questions are “good” questions, and the test is ready for the full administration.
- Test the test contractor and state to ensure the assessment is well administered.
- Allow districts and schools to evaluate their computers and technology and identify investments that will need to be made before Spring 2015.
- Allow students and teachers to familiarize themselves with this new approach to assessments.