Coming Soon: A New Generation of Assessments
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How two Common Core assessment consortia were created—and how they compare.

1. A short 27 months ago, two groups of U.S. states were each awarded more than $175 million to design, develop, and pilot test a new generation of assessments (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). These new tests will replace assessments in English language arts and mathematics in grades 3–8 and high school that are currently in use within state and federal accountability systems. They will measure individual student growth toward college and career readiness and provide data that can inform decisions regarding teaching and learning, program improvement, and educator effectiveness. The systems will be ready for use in the 2014–15 school year—about two years from now.

2. Why did the U.S. Department of Education fund the development of two different systems—the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers1 (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium2 (Smarter Balanced)? Certainly both groups submitted high-quality proposals. Some observers predicted that at least two consortia would receive funds to allay fears of a "national assessment" and of usurpation of local control over the curriculum. Whatever the reason, the two systems offer unique attributes and are working together to bring about substantive advances in K–12 testing, scoring, and reporting.

How the Initiative Got Started

3. The Common Core State Standards Initiative began in 2009, a collaborative effort among nearly all of the U.S. states and territories, the National Governors Association, and the Council of Chief State School Officers. Several issues drove the initiative, such as evidence of significant differences in academic expectations across U.S. states; student mobility, which exacerbates the problem of disparate state standards; changes in the skill sets required for current and emerging jobs; and increasing global competition in the workplace. The initiative released voluntary standards for mathematics and English language arts in 2010. Since then, all but five states (Alaska, Minnesota, Nebraska, Texas, and Virginia) have formally adopted them (and Minnesota has adopted the English language arts standards only). Adopting states may augment the new standards with state-specific standards, provided the latter comprise no more than 15 percent of the state's total standards. The initiative didn't call for, nor does it support, a national curriculum. The common standards were designed to identify the most essential skills and knowledge students need—not *how* students acquire them. The initiative is state led; oversight of curricular matters will continue to be the prerogative of the individual states. The initiative also recognized that common standards alone would not achieve the goal of preparing all students for college or careers. The group called for the development of tools and resources for educators to use in adjusting their classroom practices, instructional materials aligned to the standards, and new assessments to measure and report on student progress. In response, the U.S. Department of Education launched the Race to the Top Assessment Program (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.), allocating $362 million to support the development of new assessment systems and a range of related supports.

Common Assessments and the Consortia

4. In March 2010, the U.S. Department of Education announced a competitive grant program for consortia of 15 or more states to develop new assessment systems aligned to common academic standards. In September 2010, two consortia,3 PARCC and Smarter Balanced, were awarded grants to develop comprehensive assessment systems.

5. Currently, 39 states and the District of Columbia have joined one of these two consortia as governing members, which means they will implement the new common assessments in 2014–

15 in grades 3–8 and high school as their federally required assessments under No Child Left Behind. Another five states are currently provisional members of one or both consortia. Although the Race to the Top Assessment Program funds are paying for the design, development, and piloting of the assessment systems and related supports, members will assume test implementation costs. For many states, these costs are projected to be lower than the costs of their current state testing systems, but for some, these costs will likely be higher.

The federal grant requires that all assessment content developed with grant funds be made freely available to all states—even those that don't belong to a consortium—that request it for administering assessments. However, the timeline and security procedures for such access are not yet known.

What Should You Expect?

6 The assessment consortia are drawing on new advances in technology, cognitive science, and measurement as they develop this improved generation of assessments. They hope these new systems will address concerns about existing state assessments—that many assessments measure skills too narrowly; return results that are "too little, too late" to be useful; and do not adequately assess whether students can apply their skills to solve complex problems, an ability students need to succeed in college, the workplace, and as citizens. These new assessments will differ significantly from most existing state assessments in the following ways:

1. Most students will complete the assessments on computers or other digital devices and receive the results within two weeks.
2. The assessments will feature complex, multipart tasks. In language arts, these include executing electronic searches, selecting credible sources, and developing a written argument supported by evidence from those sources. In math, these include solving applied math problems that require using modern tools such as statistical packages and dynamic graphing software.
3. The assessments will require students to comprehend and analyze texts across all content areas that are at a higher level of complexity than those that many districts now use.

7 Accordingly, teachers and students should expect to see more challenging reading materials on these assessments and more complex, real-world tasks in addition to the more traditional selected-response and short-answer questions.

An Overview of PARCC- *this section does not apply to California and was therefore taken out from the original version of the article.*

An Overview of Smarter Balanced

8 The Smarter Balanced system is designed to strategically "balance" summative, interim, and formative assessments while providing accurate year-to-year indicators of students' progress toward college and career readiness. The system has two summative components and an optional, customizable system of adaptive interim assessments. (Sample test items.)

Summative Assessments

9 Smarter Balanced will develop accountability assessments for English language arts and literacy and for mathematics for grades 3–8 and grade 11 consisting of two components— performance tasks and an end-of-year computer-adaptive assessment. Although the assessments will be delivered on the computer, the consortium will offer a paper-and-pencil option for three years as schools transition to this format. A unique attribute of the Smarter Balanced summative assessments is that students can retake the summative assessments if this option is locally approved. The retake would consist of a new set of items and tasks. *Performance tasks.* Administered during the final 12 weeks of school, these tasks will generally take students 90–120 minutes to complete for each content area; high school tasks will take longer than those for younger grades. The tasks will be organized around real-world scenarios.

10 For example, high school students may be asked to review a financial document, conduct a series of mathematical analyses using a spreadsheet or statistical software, develop a conclusion, and provide evidence for it. The performance tasks will evaluate aspects of the Common Core State Standards that are difficult to assess through more traditional items. A combination of teacher and machine scoring will be used. *End-of-year computer-adaptive assessment.* This end-of-year assessment will consist of approximately 40–65 questions for each content area and will include selected-response, constructed-response, and technology-enhanced items. Most of these items will be immediately scored, although some human-scored elements may be included. Student scores from both the performance tasks and the computer-adaptive test will be combined for the annual summative scores in English language arts and mathematics. The consortium will build vertical scales across grades 3–11 in both subject areas, which schools can then use as the basis for growth measures that evaluate an individual's progress toward college and career readiness across the years. Although the specifics of the vertical scale have not yet been developed, it can be thought of as similar to a yardstick used to measure a child's height across the years. Both the summative assessment results and the interim assessment results will be reportable on this vertical scale. A web-based platform will manage assessment data and provide sophisticated data reporting and analysis tools for customized reports. Security settings will enable students, teachers, parents, and administrators to view appropriate data. Student scores on the performance tasks will be reported separately as well as in combination with the computer-adaptive testing component. To aid interpretation, the report will illustrate student performance levels with specific examples.

Optional Interim Assessments

11 Optional computer-adaptive assessments will be available for grades 3–12 in English language arts and mathematics. The item types will mirror those on the summative assessment. Educators can use the open item bank for both instruction and professional development.

12 Because states, districts, and schools can determine the number, scope, and timing of the interim assessments, they can tailor them to local curriculums. Two modes of test administration will be available. One version will yield a score on the same scale as the summative assessment, which schools can use as a growth or achievement metric. A shorter "cluster assessment" mode, perhaps targeting the most recently taught standards, will provide more detailed feedback.

Other Resources from Smarter Balanced

13 A digital library and comprehensive electronic platform will hold an expanding collection of resources for teachers, administrators, students, and parents, such as released items and tasks, model curriculum units, instructional resources, formative tools and exemplars, and professional development modules.

Navigating the Transition

14 Tough challenges are likely ahead as district and school leaders work to bring the Common Core State Standards alive in their classrooms within two years. What can school and district leaders do to begin this transition?

Build Teacher Understanding

15 A necessary first step is to engage teachers in a careful analysis of the standards. Discuss the standards within grade-level groups and across grade levels so teachers see how the key concepts develop and build on one another over multiple years. For example, students in grades 6–8 will build their understanding of geometry beginning with surface, area, and volume.

They will then progress through the use of angle measure in figures to the rotation, reflection, and translation of cylinders, cones, and spheres. (See the progressions documents.)

16 The English language arts standards include three appendices that illustrate the practical application of the standards at the classroom level, which many teachers find essential to understanding the instructional shifts required. In mathematics, the Standards for Mathematical Practice are an excellent starting point for understanding what's new and different about these standards. Carving out regularly occurring blocks of time for teachers to explore the standards is essential to building depth of understanding.

Take Advantage of Resources

17 Even as the field awaits the resources that the consortia are developing, a growing number of free, high-quality resources are available on the web. The Council of Chief State School Officers has developed a list of tools and resources. Several states that won Race to the Top state grants are also making their tools and resources available. Of particular note is EngageNY, which offers tailored materials for principals, transition team leaders, teachers, and administrators. Administrators should also check their own state education department website for resources and guidance.

Groom Lead Teachers

18 Both PARCC and Smarter Balanced are forming cadres of lead teachers and educators within each member state. These educators will gain deep understanding of the standards, assessments, and available tools and resources and then train others within their states. Check with your consortium contact person to find out about your state's plans for these activities.

2015 and Beyond

19 K–12 assessment is at the beginning of a sea change. Many of the competencies now considered essential for success in college and the workplace are complex and difficult to measure. The assessment consortia, caught in the midst of this change, must navigate a series of tough challenges, choices, and trade-offs.

20 To meet the expanded policy purposes and anticipated uses of the data, these systems of assessments must go far beyond simply determining whether a student has met grade-level standards. They must measure individual growth for all students and provide more accurate information concerning students who perform well above or well below the standards. They must yield fine-grain information that can inform instructional and programmatic decisions. And they must be able to evolve over time to reflect changes in the skills needed in our global marketplace and to incorporate advances in technology, cognitive science, and measurement. The goal, then, is to ensure that the assessment systems of 2014–15 are the best possible starting point for this new generation of assessments. Perhaps the greatest benefit of this coalescence of states around a common set of academic standards and two comprehensive assessment systems is the creation of the critical mass needed to accelerate research and development across the entire K–12 education enterprise. Thus, 2014–15 is not really the finish line, but only the first leg in a longer relay race to create next-generation teaching, learning, and assessment systems that prepare all students for a strong future and are worthy of our children, teachers, and schools.

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