

Better, Fewer, and Fairer Tests

The Promise of the Common Core Assessments

Too many students spend too much class time filling in bubble sheets to prepare for state multiple-choice tests. But there is good news: States that have adopted the more rigorous Common Core standards will be able to take advantage of higher-quality assessments that align with them. The transition to the Common Core will lead to better, fewer, and fairer tests for both students and schools.

Better Tests

Current state tests do not adequately measure student success. An analysis of current assessments in 17 states found that none of the math assessments and only 6 percent of the English language arts assessments tested students on deeper learning concepts.¹ They did not address the knowledge and content that really matters, such as depth of understanding, writing and research skills, and complex analysis.²

We need critical thinking. The new Common Core-aligned tests move beyond traditional multiple-choice tests. The new tests are performance based and will require students to use their critical thinking, problem solving, and writing skills.³ Instead of simply filling in answers on bubble sheets, students will have to solve more complex math problems and demonstrate the thought processes they used to reach their answers.⁴

The Common Core tests are both high quality and affordable. Because states are working together to develop the new tests, the assessments will be of higher quality and cost less than they would for individual states. The tests will cost states less than \$30 per student approximately, which is about the average of what they now spend on current tests.⁵

Current state exams don't adequately measure knowledge



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Common Core tests are affordable



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What are the Common Core State Standards?

States currently have very inconsistent standards, which have led to extreme differences in state-level student achievement. Fifty-nine percent of Minnesota fourth graders scored at or above proficient on a national math test,⁶ compared to only 26 percent of Louisiana fourth graders.⁷ To ensure that all students are taught to high standards, teachers, parents, school administrators, and leading experts developed a single set of clear K-12 educational achievement standards for students in English language arts and mathematics that are known as the Common Core. These more rigorous standards were designed to raise the bar on the quality of education delivered in the classroom and ensure that students graduate from high school ready to enter postsecondary education and the workforce. To date, 45 states and the District of Columbia have voluntarily adopted the standards.⁸

Fewer Tests

A few tests are required, but many are not. Students are subjected to a multitude of tests; state and federal law require some of them, but not many. In addition to the state test, the average seventh-grade student in Denver, Colorado, will spend 14 hours on district-level assessments. Compare this to Baltimore, Maryland, where seventh graders are likely to spend only 1.5 hours on district tests.⁹

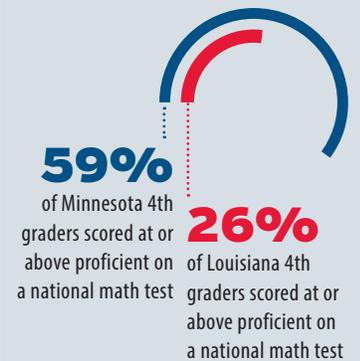
Unnecessary tests should be rolled back. States, districts, and schools need to take stock of the tests they are using to ensure that every assessment is a necessary tool to help students reach the Common Core standards. New York, for example, is offering grants to districts as an incentive to reduce local standardized testing. Districts that review and re-evaluate the purpose of their local assessments will receive funding that can be used to support instruction.¹⁰

Fairer Tests

The new tests will present a more genuine picture of what students do and do not know. Instead of relying on multiple-choice questions that only tell teachers whether a student's answer is right or wrong, the new tests have open-ended questions, the answers to which will allow teachers to see students' gaps in skills and knowledge.

The new tests will be comparable from state to state. Right now, states have very inconsistent standards and assessments. But because states are working together to develop the new assessments, the tests will be comparable from state to state. Parents can therefore have confidence that the results come from a level playing field—and students will be prepared if they move to a different state or cross state lines to attend college.

Inconsistent state standards create an uneven education for students



An example question from Smarter Balanced

23.42	
23.18	
23.21	
23.35	
23.24	

Five swimmers compete in the 50-meter race. The finish time for each swimmer is shown above.

Explain how the results of the race would change if the race used a clock that rounded to the nearest tenth.

Transitioning to the New Tests—What it Means for Teachers and Students

Teachers support Common Core. The new standards and tests are as much of a change for teachers as they are for students. But teachers are largely supportive: A 2013 survey of 20,000 teachers found that 77 percent believe the Common Core standards will improve their students' ability to think critically.¹¹

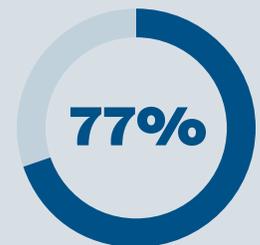
The use of tests to evaluate teachers should be fair and valid. While student test scores are not the only factor that states and districts use to evaluate school and educator performance, teachers and school leaders are questioning the fairness of their inclusion as schools begin to transition to the Common Core tests and standards. In response, the U.S. Department of Education has provided states with the flexibility to delay the use of teacher evaluation results to inform personnel decisions, such as tenure, until the 2016-17 school year.¹² A dozen states have requested this flexibility,¹³ and six states have already been approved.¹⁴

Teachers need support to implement the new standards in the classroom. Teachers cannot effectively teach to these higher standards without the proper training and resources. Some schools and districts are on the right path. For example, Orchard Gardens K-8 Pilot School in Boston, Massachusetts, has increased learning time for students and incorporated 100-minute highly structured teacher collaboration meetings that allow teachers to plan lessons and share best practices as they implement the new standards.¹⁵ The state of Tennessee recognized that classroom teachers will need support and opportunities to collaborate in order to match instruction to the standards' demands; it has trained more than 3,000 school leaders and coaches to work directly with teachers as the standards are implemented.¹⁶

States can avoid double-testing students during the transition. Until the new Common Core tests are fully implemented, states must continue to use their state tests to evaluate student progress. However, some schools are currently piloting the new Common Core tests. To avoid more testing than necessary, the U.S. Department of Education is allowing states to administer only one test to students—either the old state test or the field tests.¹⁷

Teachers overwhelmingly support the goals of the Common Core

A 2013 survey of 20,000 teachers found that 77 percent believe the Common Core standards will improve their students' ability to think critically.¹²



Endnotes

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- 3 Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, "Partnership for Assessments," available at http://www.parcconline.org/sites/parcc/files/PARCCFactSheetandFAQsBackgrounder_FINAL.pdf (last accessed February 2014).
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- 6 National Center for Education Statistics, "The Nation's Report Card: Mathematics 2013 State Snapshot Report: Minnesota Grade 4 Public Schools" (2013), available at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/stt2013/pdf/2014465MN4.pdf>.
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- 8 Common Core State Standards Initiative, "In the States," available at <http://www.corestandards.org/in-the-states> (last accessed February 2014).
- 9 Mark Teoh and others, "The Student and the Stopwatch: How much time do American students spend on testing?" (Boston: Teach Plus, 2014), available at http://www.teachplus.org/uploads/Documents/1391446664_The%20Student%20and%20the%20Stopwatch.pdf.
- 10 Letter from Commissioner John B. King, Jr. to Colleagues, October 24, 2013, available at <http://usny.nysed.gov/docs/teaching-is-the-core.pdf>.
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- 12 Letter from Education Secretary Arne Duncan to Chief State School Officers, June 18, 2013, available at <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/secletter/130618.html>.
- 13 Michelle McNeil, "Post on e McNeil, /policy/elsec/guid/secletter/130618.htEvaluation Rollout," Education Week Politics K-12 blog, November 26, 2013, available at http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2013/11/a_dozen_states_have_applied.html.
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