

PARENTS' GUIDE TO NEW ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS AND MATHEMATICS ASSESSMENTS IN CONNECTICUT

In July 2010, Connecticut adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The CCSS provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn in English language arts and mathematics as they progress through grades K–12.

In the 2014–15 school year, Connecticut will begin rolling out new assessments aligned to the CCSS. The new assessments are being used to gauge how well students are mastering the standards—and ultimately how ready they are for college and further career education and training. In spring 2014, some schools will participate in a national field test to try out the new assessments and ensure that the process will run well when the tests are administered nationwide.

WHAT ARE THE COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS (CCSS)?

The Common Core State Standards are designed to enhance and improve student learning. The CCSS have greater clarity and rigor than most previous standards and are relevant to the real world, giving young people the knowledge and skills they need for college and career success. They are also robust, ensuring a future U.S. workforce that can compete in the global economy.

The new standards emphasize fewer topics and stress not only procedural skills but also conceptual and critical thinking. The CCSS build knowledge from grade to grade, enabling students to master important concepts before moving on to others.

The standards are not a curriculum. Decisions about curriculum, tools, materials, and textbooks are left to local districts and schools that know their students best.

The Common Core State Standards were developed through a state-led initiative, spearheaded by governors and state superintendents, in collaboration with teachers, school administrators, college faculty, parents, and education experts. They build on the excellent foundation laid across all states to date, and have been

internationally benchmarked to ensure rigor on par with top performing nations.

To date, more than 45 states and the District of Columbia have adopted the CCSS.

Following adoption of the new standards in 2010, Connecticut began implementing the CCSS changes in each district, school, and classroom. To prepare educators, Connecticut is providing an array of professional development opportunities, including professional learning communities where teachers and administrators work with their peers. In November 2013, the Connecticut State Department of Education launched a CCSS website. Via this site teachers can access resources, tools, and annotated units and lessons. The site also provides helpful information for families and students.

THIS GUIDE INCLUDES:

- Overview of new assessments, which measure student proficiency against more rigorous standards
- Sample questions
- Overview of accountability for students, teachers, and schools
- Additional resources for parents

CCSS-Aligned Assessments

WHY NEW ASSESSMENTS?

Teachers and principals talk a lot about assessments, which are used to measure students' academic achievement. This document highlights the end-of-year summative assessments, which judge (1) student progress toward mastering state standards and (2) program and school effectiveness. For other assessments used, see box at right.

New summative assessments will address longstanding concerns that parents, educators, and employers have had about current state assessments—namely that they measure ability to memorize facts, rather than the skills to think critically and apply knowledge.

WHAT IS DIFFERENT ABOUT THE NEW SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENTS?

The new assessments for English language arts/literacy (ELA) and mathematics will enable educators to deepen their understanding of student progress from grade to grade—and just as importantly, identify any gaps in progress so they can address them **well before students enter college or the workforce.**

Types of assessments

Classroom-based: Individual tests given by teachers as needed throughout the year to assess knowledge and skills in specific areas .

Interim: The same test repeated at set intervals to measure student growth over time

Summative: End-of-year assessments administered by the state to measure student performance against a common set of standards

This document addresses summative assessments.

New ELA assessments

- Ask students to read more complex fiction and non-fiction texts and use evidence from these texts to answer questions, make inferences, and present persuasive arguments.
- Emphasize literacy across all subjects, not just English.
- Test writing at every grade level

New math assessments:

- Go beyond multiple-choice questions and present students with multi-step problems, conceptual questions, and real-world applications.
- Ask students to not only get answers correct, but also explain how they arrived at those answers.
- Cover fewer topics in greater depth, focusing on the most critical areas.

Benefits of new assessments

- Scores provide students, parents, and teachers with insight into college and career readiness early enough to address issues and provide extra support where needed.
- In the 2014–2015 school year, Connecticut will transition to what are called “computer adaptive assessments,” which replace pencil-and-paper tests and can adjust the difficulty of questions based on student responses. A student who answers correctly will receive a more challenging item, while an incorrect answer generates an easier question.
- New assessments will allow Connecticut to compare student performance not only across schools and districts state-wide, but also with other states that have adopted the Common Core.
- The new assessments are designed to provide accurate measures of achievement and growth for all students, including those with disabilities and English language learners, allowing these students to perform to their potential. The goal of the accommodations is to make the assessments more accessible and to produce results that are valid for these students. The intention is not to give them an advantage over other students. For students with disabilities, the online assessments will address visual, auditory, and physical-access barriers. These students will be able to take a test individualized to meet their needs at the same time as other students in their class. Tools have also been developed to help English language learners demonstrate their knowledge, regardless of their level of proficiency in English.

Who is developing the new assessments?

Because the CCSS is a state-led initiative, most states across the country chose to join one of two consortia of states working together to develop new assessments based on the CCSS. These are the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC).

Connecticut is a member of the Smarter Balanced along with 25 other states and territories. However, all customization and final decisions about assessments remain at the state level, in partnership with local educators. Read more about the Smarter Balanced at: www.smarterbalanced.org.

College and Career Readiness Defined:

The level of preparation a student needs to enroll and succeed—without remediation—in a credit-bearing course at a post-secondary institution that offers a baccalaureate degree or in a high-quality certificate program that enables students to enter a career pathway with potential future advancement.

Sample questions by grade level

The following questions are representative of those found on the new assessments. For more examples, visit www.smarterbalanced.org/pilot-test.

EXAMPLE OF A 5TH GRADE MATH QUESTION

SAMPLE ITEM

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

	23.42		23.35
	23.18		23.24
	23.21		

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

Explanation:

EXAMPLE OF A 6TH GRADE ENGLISH QUESTION

SAMPLE ITEM

Students are asked to read the essay “Planes on the Brain” by Elisabeth Deffner, from Faces Magazine, and answer the following questions:

1. How does the author emphasize the point that the TAM program was a positive influence on the sisters’ lives? Use details from the text to support your answer.
2. Highlight the parts of the text that provide evidence to support the idea that the Tuskegee Airmen were historically important.
3. What does the author mean by “the sky is no longer the limit”? Use details from the text to support your response.

Answer:

EXAMPLE OF A 11TH GRADE ENGLISH QUESTION

SAMPLE ITEM

The following excerpt is from a writer’s first draft of a narrative essay. Read the excerpt. Then rewrite it, revising it to correct errors.

I had no idea what to expect when I walked into the arena. There were people everywhere, most of them clad in brightly colored jersey’s with different players’ names on the back of them. There were some names I couldnt even pronounce. Me and my friend made our way to the corridor that led to the ice rink. The minute I stepped through the doorway, I could feel a rush of cold air hit my face. I could actually smell the ice! I never thought ice had a smell, but it really does. The next thing I noticed was the size, of the ice rink. There were lines and circles painted all over it, and I knew immediately I wouldn’t understand the rules. We found our seats, and it wasn’t long before the game started. We sat so close to the action that I felt as if I was right in the middle of it, the action was so intense it was hard to follow the puck, keep an eye on the players, and to figure out which team was ahead. When the home team scored a goal. The entire arena erupted with cheering that was so loud, I bet it was heard across town. by the end of the game, I felt so many emotions: delight, disappointment, fear, and excitement. Mostly, though, I felt in awe of the athletes who played this game. They are much more tougher than I ever expected. I suspect others new to hockey will be as impressed as me by this fast, interesting game.

Now rewrite the excerpt, revising it to correct errors.

Answer:

What Parents Can Expect

This is a new system with a new way of scoring. Therefore, it is not possible to directly compare new scores with old.

The new assessments measure deeper knowledge and skills deemed particularly important for students' futures, including problem-solving, writing, and critical thinking. The scores provide students, parents, and teachers with the ability to address issues well before students are ready to graduate.

Because the standards are more rigorous, student achievement scores may initially be lower.

Connecticut is resetting teaching and learning. A dip should not necessarily be interpreted as a decline in student learning or in educator performance. Educators expect the short-term decline to improve as teachers and students become more familiar with the standards and better equipped to meet the challenges they present.

How will schools support students during the transition?

Each Local Educational Agency (LEA) and school will support students and teachers differently during this transition. While the Connecticut State Department of Education provides educators with a variety of tools, each LEA will determine the best ways to directly support teachers, students, and parents.

If children experience a dip in progress or state test results, parents should not hesitate to discuss this with their child's teachers and to work with the school to develop a plan for enrichment or improvement.

How are students and teachers held accountable?

Once the new assessments are implemented in 2014–15, the Connecticut Department of Education will revise its accountability plan. The plan, along with new school accountability procedures, will also specify the ways students who do not meet proficiency levels will be held accountable.

In the immediate future, even if a student does not meet proficiency levels, there should be no negative consequences such as holding him or her back a year. Instead, parents can work with the school to develop an improvement plan tailored to the specific student's needs.

The new plan will also articulate teacher-accountability measures ensuring that teacher effectiveness ratings are measured against student progress throughout the year. In the meantime, teacher evaluation criteria will remain the same.



TAKE ACTION: Parents need to pay close attention to the new accountability system put in place so they can better advocate for their children. Parents' collective voice is critical to ensure that testing is implemented well and with enough resources to ensure success. State leaders should include parents and teachers in thoughtful conversations based on trust, collaboration, and respect. If you would like additional details about how students, teachers, and schools will be held accountable or about assessments in general, please call the Connecticut Department of Education's Academic Office at 860-713-6753. Here are some questions that you might want to ask:

- What will happen if my child does not meet proficiency on the new assessments?
- How will teacher evaluations be affected if students don't meet proficiency levels?
- How will school ratings change based on results of the new assessments?

Preparing and supporting your child

- Discuss the new tests with your child. Make sure he or she is not afraid or anxious going into the new tests.
- With an older child, explain that the new assessments were created to make sure he or she is on track to succeed after graduation and to identify any issues early enough to give more support where it is needed.
- Explain to your child that the tests will initially be more challenging. Tell your child you have high expectations and that you are there to help every step of the way.
- Review test results with your child, taking time to discuss areas of strength and areas where there is room for improvement. Bring the teacher into the discussion as needed.
- Provide a quiet, comfortable place for studying at home and make sure your child gets a good night's sleep before a test.

Staying informed and involved

- Become familiar with the Common Core State Standards.
- Read all comments written by the teacher on classroom lessons and tests. Ask teachers to explain anything that is unclear and discuss how you can best work together to address comments.
- Monitor your child's progress. If your child needs extra help or wants to learn more about a subject, work with his or her teacher to identify opportunities for tutoring, after-school clubs, or other resources.
- Understand that tests are not perfect measures of what a child can do. Scores can be affected by the way he or she is feeling on test day or the particular classroom setting. Assessments are useful but should not be the only factor in determining a child's academic growth.
- Meet with your child's teacher as often as possible to discuss your child's progress. Ask for activities to do at home to help prepare for tests and improve your child's proficiency.

Additional Resources

- For a more detailed look at what the CCSS mean at each grade level, visit: www.pta.org/parentsguide
- For information on the implementation of the CCSS in Connecticut visit: <http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/site/default.asp>
- For more information on the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, of which Connecticut is a member, visit:
 - <http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/cwp/view.asp?a=2748&Q=334726>
 - www.smarterbalanced.org