

PARENTS' GUIDE TO NEW ASSESSMENTS IN ARKANSAS

In July 2010, Arkansas adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The CCSS provide consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to know and be able to do in English language arts (ELA) and literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects, as well as mathematics as they progress from Kindergarten through grade 12.

In the 2014-2015 school year, Arkansas students in grades 3-11 will take the new ELA/literacy assessments aligned to the CCSS. Students in grades 3-8 and students taking Algebra I, Geometry, and Algebra II classes will take new mathematics assessments. These assessments will be used to gauge how well students are mastering the standards – and ultimately how ready students are to succeed in college and careers. In spring 2014, some schools across the state will participate in field-testing the new assessments to ensure that the new test items are free of bias and that they challenge students working at all performance levels.

WHAT ARE COMMON CORE STANDARDS?

Common Core State Standards are designed to enhance and improve student learning. The CCSS have greater clarity and rigor than previous standards and are relevant to the real world, giving young people the knowledge and skills they need for college and career success. The CCSS 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 rote 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 more complex concepts.

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.

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

Since adoption of the new standards in July 2010, Arkansas has been implementing CCSS in each district, school, and classroom. Professional development opportunities have been made available to administrators and teachers. These opportunities focus on aligning curricula to meet the rigor of the CCSS expectations, using available resources to support instruction, and preparing for the new assessments. In addition to state-designed professional development resources, the ADE will leverage national collaborative efforts that are currently underway to provide educators a variety of tools and resources.

THIS GUIDE INCLUDES:

- Overview of new assessments, which measure student proficiency against more rigorous standards
- Sample assessment 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 summative assessments, which judge student progress toward mastering state standards, as well as 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 students' ability to memorize facts, rather than their critical thinking and knowledge application skills.

WHAT IS DIFFERENT ABOUT THE NEW SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENTS?

The new assessments enable educators to deepen their understanding of student progress from grade to grade—and just as importantly, identify and address any gaps in progress **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: Assessments administered near the end of each year by the state to measure student performance against a common set of standards

This document addresses summative assessments.

English language arts assessments demonstrate:

- Whether students can read and comprehend literary and informational texts of varying complexities.
- How effectively students can write when using and/or analyzing sources, including how well students can integrate information across sources to support a topic or claim.
- The degree to which students can use context to determine the meaning of academic vocabulary.

Math assessments demonstrate:

- Whether students understand and can use important mathematical content from each grade level.
- The extent to which students can use reasoning while constructing mathematically sound arguments and critiques.
- The extent to which students can solve real-world problems and engage in mathematical modeling practice.
- The extent to which students (Grades 3-6) can demonstrate fluency in areas set forth by the CCSS.

Benefits of new assessments

- During the next few years, assessments will provide results more quickly and in an easy-to-understand format. Parents can use this information to better communicate with teachers and school administrators about their child's progress, and teachers can use it to better tailor instruction to each child's needs.
- Computer-based assessments will replace pencil and paper tests (with exceptions for students with special needs). Computer-based assessments are more efficient, innovative, and engaging, and provide insight into student progress at multiple points.
- New assessments will allow Arkansas to compare student performance across schools and districts statewide, as well as with the performance of students in other states that have adopted the Common Core State Standards.
- School districts will have access to sample questions and online practice tests to help parents prepare their children for assessments.
- The new assessments are designed to provide accurate measures of achievement and growth for all students, including those with disabilities and English language learners. Online assessments can address visual, auditory, and physical access barriers for students with disabilities, while enabling them to take tests at the same time as others in their class. English language learners will be able to demonstrate knowledge in the various content areas (e.g., math, science, and social science), regardless of their level of proficiency in English. The intention is not to give these students an advantage, but to provide the accessibility needed for accurate results.

Who is developing the new assessments?

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

Although Arkansas is a member of the PARCC consortium, all 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:

In Arkansas, college and career readiness means that students acquire the knowledge and skills they need to be successful in future endeavors, including successfully completing credit-bearing, first-year courses at a postsecondary institution and embarking on a chosen career. To be college and career ready, students need to be adept problem solvers and critical thinkers who can apply their knowledge in novel contexts and unforeseen situations. Smart Core—the default curriculum for all Arkansas public high school students—is the foundation for college and career readiness. Students should supplement Smart Core with additional rigorous coursework in the area of their career focus.

Sample questions by grade level

The following questions are representative of those found on the new assessments. For more examples, visit www.parconline.org/samples/item-task-prototypes.

EXAMPLE OF A 4TH GRADE MATH QUESTION

Three classes at Lakeview School are going on a field trip. The Table shows the number of people in each class, including the teacher.

They can choose to use buses, vans, and cars.



Buses have 20 seats



Vans have 16 seats



Cars have 5 seats

	Total number of people
Mrs. Ruiz's Class	23
Mr. Yangs's Class	25
Mrs. Evan's Class	24

Which three combinations can be used to take all three classes on a field trip?

- 1 bus and 4 vans 1 bus and 8 cars
 3 vans and 11 cars 2 buses and 3 vans and 4 cars
 1 bus and 1 van and 6 cars

Submit Answer

EXAMPLE OF A 6TH GRADE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS QUESTION

Students are asked to read a passage from the fiction text "Julie of the Wolves" by Jean C. George and answer the following:

SAMPLE ITEM

In the passage, the author developed a strong character named Miyax. Think about Miyax and the details the author used to create the character. The passage ends with Miyax waiting for the black wolf to look at her.

Write an original story to continue where the passage ended. In your story, be sure to use what you have learned about the character Miyax as you tell what happens to her next.

Answer:

EXAMPLE OF A 10TH GRADE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS QUESTION

SAMPLE ITEM

Use what you have learned from reading "Daedalus and Icarus" by Ovid and "To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Triumph" by Anne Sexton to write an essay that provides an analysis of how Sexton transforms Daedalus and Icarus.

As a starting point, you may want to consider what is emphasized, absent, or different in the two texts, but feel free to develop your own focus for analysis.

Develop your essay by providing textual evidence from both texts. Be sure to follow the conventions of standard English.

Answer:

What Parents Can Expect

This is a new set of standards and assessments with a new way of scoring. Therefore, it is not possible to directly compare new scores with old ones.

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.

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 are students held accountable?

The new assessments will have five performance (or achievement) levels for the ELA/literacy and mathematics assessments at grades 3-11. Students at grades 3-8 who achieve levels four and five in ELA/literacy or mathematics—scores that demonstrate strong command of the CCSS knowledge, skills, and practices—will be considered prepared for further studies within that content area. Students at grades 9-10 who achieve levels four and five in ELA/literacy or mathematics will be considered on track for college and career within that content area. Students at grade 11 who achieve levels four and five in ELA/literacy or mathematics will be considered college and career ready within that content area. Students who do not achieve levels four or five will receive remediation/acceleration for those skills and concepts identified on the assessment as weaknesses.

How will schools support students during the transition?

If a student is struggling, the teacher must develop an academic improvement plan that addresses the areas in need of growth. Teachers may provide additional support to students individually or in small groups. In addition, schools can use various strategies to provide support. For example, some schools offer after-school tutoring or pull-out programs during the school day.

How are schools held accountable?

The U.S. Department of Education awards waivers under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act to states that agree to adopt certain accountability measures, such as teacher evaluations tied to student test scores. In exchange, states receive flexibility in implementing some of the NCLB requirements, such as the requirements related to student proficiency in math and reading. Based on the flexibility waiver that the ADE has with the U.S. Department of Education, individual schools in Arkansas have Annual Measureable Objectives that they must meet to show student progress within all student groups and the targeted achievement gap group. Schools not meeting these objectives and identified as Focus or Priority will receive assistance from ADE.

How are teachers held accountable?

Arkansas recently redesigned its teacher evaluation system, and teachers and administrators are receiving professional development as the new system is implemented. Teachers will be evaluated using a very specific set of criteria with evidence required to demonstrate performance for each measure. Student growth will also be included as a factor in a teacher's overall rating.

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.
- Provide a quiet, comfortable place for studying at home and make sure your child gets a good night's sleep.
- Discuss any questions or concerns with your child's teacher.

Staying informed and involved

- Become familiar with the Common Core State Standards by visiting <http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards>.
- View samples of new test questions and get more information regarding how the PARCC assessments were developed at www.parcconline.org/samples/item-task-prototypes.
- Read all comments written by teachers 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 a single test score does not represent all that your child can or cannot do. It is a snapshot only. Assessment scores 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 your child prepare for tests and to improve your child's proficiency in skills called for in the Common Core State Standards.

Additional Resources

- For more detailed look at what the CCSS mean at each grade level, visit: www.pta.org/parentsguide
- For information on the implementation of CCSS in Arkansas, visit: www.arkansased.org