


[Buy this issue](#)

 Share on **Twitter**

 Share on **Facebook**

 Share on **LinkedIn**

 Share on **Google+**

- [Read Abstract](#)

March 2014 | Volume 71 | Number 6

Using Assessments Thoughtfully Pages 57-60

The Common Core Assessments: What You Need to Know

Nancy Doorey

Feeling anxious about the impending arrival of the new standardized tests? Here are the basics.

It's spring 2014, and the two Common Core assessment consortia are field-testing their new English language arts and mathematics tests. Soon, these will be the tests used to measure student, school, and state performance on the Common Core State Standards, so questions and concerns abound. In this brief article, I'll address three of the most commonly raised questions about these assessments.

Q When will the new assessments roll out?

The summative assessments developed by the two assessment consortia—the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium—will be field-tested by some schools in spring 2014. But the first time all students in consortia member states will be required to take these tests for accountability purposes will be the 2014–15 school year.

In spring 2015, students in PARCC states will take the new summative assessments in grades 3–11; students in Smarter Balanced states will take them in grades 3–8 and grade 11 unless the state or district also requires assessments in grades 9 and 10.

Q How many hours will the tests take to complete, and how will the time be scheduled?

Both consortia's summative assessments will be administered during the final three months of the school year and are estimated to require 7–10 hours for both English language arts and mathematics combined, spread across multiple testing sessions. Although there are differences across the two consortia in assessment design, both will contain a performance-based component and an end-of-year component. Figures 1 and 2 provide more detailed information about what each of these components will contain.

Figure 1. PARCC's Nine Testing Sessions, Spread Across Two Testing Windows

Maximum 4-week window after 75% of instruction

Maximum 4-week window after 90% of instruction

English Language Arts/Literacy	Performance-Based Assessment	End-of-Year Assessment
	<p>Number of testing sessions: 3</p> <p>Assessments: Three tasks, in which students must read one or more texts, answer several short comprehension and vocabulary questions, and write an essay based on evidence from the text(s).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One literary analysis task. • One narrative writing task. • One research simulation task. <p>Scoring: Combination of machine and human scoring.</p>	<p>Number of testing sessions: 2</p> <p>Assessments:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple item types on fixed-form tests. • Will focus on comprehending complex texts, including vocabulary interpretation and use, using 4–5 texts. <p>Scoring: Machine scored.</p>
Mathematics	<p>Number of testing sessions: 2</p> <p>Assessments:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will focus on the Major Content of the grade/course as defined in the PARCC Model Content Frameworks. • Multistep, real-world problems will require the application of key skills, processes and practices. <p>Scoring: Combination of machine and human scoring.</p>	<p>Number of testing sessions: 2</p> <p>Assessments:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple item types on fixed-form tests. • End-of-course assessments in grades 9–11, with traditional and integrated mathematics sequences supported. <p>Scoring: Machine scored.</p>

Figure 2. Smarter Balanced's Multiple Testing Sessions

12-Week Testing Window at End of School Year		
Performance Tasks (PT)		
English Language Arts/Literacy	<p>2 hours</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One task in which students will read multiple articles and write one or more essays using evidence from the readings. • Combination of machine and human scoring. 	<p>Computer Adaptive Assessment</p> <p>90 minutes (grades 3–8) to 120 minutes (grade 11)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Computer adaptive delivery, with multiple item types. • Primarily machine scored. • Combination of machine and, as needed, human scoring.
	<p>Mathematics</p> <p>60 minutes for grades 3–8 and 90 minutes for grade 11</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One mathematics task that will measure student ability to integrate knowledge across multiple standards and solve complex real-world problems. • Combination of machine and human scoring. 	<p>90 minutes (grades 3–5) to 120 minutes (grades 6–8 and 11)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Computer adaptive delivery, with multiple item types. • Primarily machine scored. • Combination of machine and, as needed, human scoring.

The PARCC Assessment Schedule

Schools in PARCC states will have two testing windows, each a maximum of 20 school days. The first window, which will occur after approximately 75 percent of the school year's instruction, will be used to administer the consortium's performance-based assessments. The second window, which will occur after approximately 90 percent of instruction, will be used to administer the end-of-year assessments. States are working with schools and districts to identify the most appropriate 20-day testing windows from a set of options to ensure that all students have completed similar amounts of instruction before testing begins.

Individual students will complete their testing over a few days within each schoolwide 20-day testing window, depending on the school's technology capacity. The tests are untimed, but the estimated total time on task for combined English language arts and mathematics assessments for students in PARCC states are

- Grade 3: eight hours.
- Grades 4–5: nine hours and 20 minutes.
- Grades 6–8: nine hours and 25 minutes.
- Grade 9–10: nine hours and 45 minutes.
- Grade 11: nine hours and 55 minutes.

The Smarter Balanced Assessment Schedule

Schools in Smarter Balanced states will administer both the performance task component and a computer adaptive assessment component during one maximum 12-week testing window, which will be scheduled within the final 33 percent of instructional days (within the final 20 percent for grade 11). Schools with the technology capacity to do so may choose to use shorter testing windows, placing the performance tasks closer to the end of the school year.

Students will participate in multiple testing sessions for English language arts and mathematics, although the guidance and policies related to the number of testing sessions for each content area are yet to be established.

The estimated total testing time for combined English language arts and mathematics, spread over several days, is as follows:

- Grades 3–5: seven hours (includes up to one hour of in-class activity).
- Grades 6–8: seven hours and 30 minutes (includes up to one hour of in-class activity).
- Grade 11: eight hours and 30 minutes (includes up to one hour of in-class activity).

The in-class activity time will be used for the teacher to give an introduction at the start of each of the two performance tasks. These introductions will be carefully scripted to ensure that all students receive the same information.

Q What supports can educators draw on to help with the transition to these new assessments?

The two consortia—as well as professional organizations, nonprofits, and publishers—have developed many supports to help schools implement the Common Core standards and the aligned assessments. Here are a few noteworthy ones.

Both PARCC and Smarter Balanced received supplemental grants from the federal government to support member states' transition to the Common Core State Standards, and both have been using a portion of those funds to train cadres of lead teachers from each member state. Cadre members are expected to support implementation and provide training within their states. Educators should contact their district's central office to find out about state and local training opportunities.

In addition, many online sources offer high-quality, free materials for both English language arts and mathematics. Here are a few.

- [The PARCC](#) and [Smarter Balanced websites](#) contain key supports for educators, including documents that delineate the skills and knowledge that will be emphasized in the assessments (PARCC's Model Content Frameworks and Smarter Balanced's Content Specifications) and sample items and tasks. Professional development modules and model instructional resources will be added over time. The Smarter Balanced website includes [online practice tests for grades 3–11](#), which are open to all. PARCC will provide practice tests in spring 2014. These will enable educators and students to become familiar with the item types, level of rigor, and computer interface for the assessments.
- [Achieve the Core](#). Developed by a nonprofit with leadership from some of the authors of the Common Core standards, this site offers free Common Core-aligned lessons, samples of student work, assessment questions, and professional development modules to support the transition to the new standards. The site encourages educators to "steal these tools and share them with others."

- [EngageNY](#). This site contains highly detailed curriculum modules with mid-module and end-of-module assessments, professional development kits for teachers and principals, a library of videos that exemplify the shifts in instruction, and a library of resources for families. All materials are free.

By September 2014, both PARCC and Smarter Balanced will launch digital libraries that contain instructional, assessment, and professional development resources. All the resources, whether culled from the best of existing state resources, developed under contract, or developed by members of the teacher cadres, will be reviewed for alignment and quality.

Each consortium is also developing optional interim assessment resources to both build understanding of the new expectations and provide information about student progress and gaps across the school year. There will be a charge for access to some of these resources. Smarter Balanced plans to release its formative tools within its digital library in spring 2014 and its computer-adaptive interim assessment system by the beginning of the 2014–15 school year. PARCC will release its midyear performance-based assessments for use in the 2014–15 school year; the consortium will release its formative tools for grades K–1, diagnostic assessment for grades 2–8, and speaking and listening assessment in time for the 2015–16 school year.

Stepping Up to the Challenge

We should not underestimate the magnitude of the change represented by the Common Core State Standards and the new assessments. But as difficult as this transition will be, it is intended to ensure that U.S. high school graduates will have the fundamental skills they need to begin credit-bearing coursework in postsecondary institutions or career-training programs. The hope is that by focusing on a core set of rigorous learning standards and creating mechanisms to quickly share the best instructional and professional development resources, we can change the trajectory of school improvement in the United States and create a much stronger future for all our youth. We are fortunate that so many educators are stepping up to this challenge.

Note: For more detailed information about the designs and rollout of the PARCC and Smarter Balanced assessments, go to the [Educational Testing Service K–12 Center's website](#), or contact the center at mail@k12center.org.

Alternate Common Core Assessment Consortia

In addition to the PARCC and Smarter Balanced assessment consortia, the following four consortia have been established to design alternative assessments for students for whom the general assessments may not be accessible or valid.

For students with significant cognitive disabilities:

- [National Center and State Collaborative \(NCSC\)](#)
- [Dynamic Learning Maps Alternate Assessment Consortium \(DLM\)](#)

For English language learners:

- [Assessment Services Supporting English Language Learners Through Technology Systems Consortium \(ASSETS\)](#)
- [English Language Proficiency Assessment for the 21st Century \(ELPA21\)](#)

[Nancy Doorey](#) is director of programs for the K–12 Center at Educational Testing Service. She also does consulting for a variety of education reform and policy groups.

KEYWORDS

Click on keywords to see similar products:
[assessment](#), [Common Core State Standards](#)

Copyright © 2014 by ASCD

Requesting Permission

- For **photocopy, electronic and online access**, and **republishing requests**, go to the [Copyright Clearance Center](#). Enter the periodical title within the "Get Permission" search field.

- To **translate** this article, contact permissions@ascd.org