

California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress: Common Questions About Smarter Balanced Assessments

Part of a Comprehensive Plan for Student Success

Knowing that public schools must change to prepare students for the challenges of the future, California has developed a comprehensive plan for high-quality teaching and learning in every school. We have a long way to go, but our work is well under way, with higher academic standards, more decision-making in the hands of schools and communities, and more resources dedicated to schools and to students with the greatest needs.

The system-wide changes we've begun are focused on helping students succeed in the long run, achieving their dreams of college and a career. We're providing more training for teachers, more resources for teachers and students, and more access to technology in all classrooms.

Thanks to teachers, administrators and school staff, exciting changes are taking place inside our classrooms. Along with reading to follow a story, students are learning to read to cite evidence and draw logical conclusions. They are learning to use math to solve real-world problems rather than merely pick out the right multiple-choice answer.

California's robust system of student assessments is one important component in understanding how our students are learning, what they know, and the supports they need to succeed.

What are the Smarter Balanced Assessments?

- The Smarter Balanced assessments are new computer based tests that measure student knowledge of California's English language arts and mathematics standards. These new assessments replace the former paper-based, multiple-choice assessments for students in grades 3-8 and 11. The first statewide administration of these assessments will take place in spring 2015.

Why are new assessments needed in California?

- California has adopted more rigorous academic standards that emphasize not only subject knowledge, but also the critical thinking, analytical writing, and problem-solving skills students need to be successful in college and career. These standards set a higher bar for California students to help ensure they are prepared to succeed in the future. Because what students need to know and be able to do has changed, our tests must change as well.
- California's new assessment system represents the next step in a comprehensive plan to promote high-quality teaching and learning and improve student outcomes. This plan recognizes that assessments can play an important role in promoting and modeling high-quality instruction.

How were these new assessments developed?

- California worked with 21 other states as part of the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium to develop these new assessments, as well as the professional and instructional resources provided to help students, teachers and schools throughout the year.
- Educators – from K-12 to higher education – were deeply involved in the design, testing and scoring of these new assessments. California conducted both pilot and statewide field tests of Smarter Balanced assessments over the last two years.

- Last year, California suspended its use of existing assessments in ELA and Math to give teachers time to focus on refining instruction of California’s more rigorous standards, to give students time to begin deeper learning, and to give schools time to prepare to administer these computer-based tests effectively.

How are Smarter Balanced Assessments an improvement over previous statewide tests?

- The Smarter Balanced assessment system uses both computer-based and computer-adaptive tests, providing students with a wider range of questions tailored to more accurately identify the knowledge and skills individual students have mastered.
- The tests include performance tasks that challenge students to demonstrate critical thinking and problem-solving, and to apply their knowledge and skills to real-world problems.
- The tests are taken online, and results are available to teachers, schools and school districts much more quickly than results from previous tests.
- The new assessments are aligned with the skills students need to start taking courses for credit at California State University campuses and other colleges. Based on their results, students in 11th grade will have more information about the type of courses and level of rigor required in their final year of high school.
- The new computer-based tests include supports for English learners and students with special needs, allowing these students the ability to effectively demonstrate their knowledge and skills.
- The new assessment system is designed to measure student growth over time, which was not possible in California’s previous system, and will provide teachers and schools important information to guide learning.

What will the Smarter Balanced tests measure?

- Smarter Balanced tests provide one measure of student knowledge of the subject matter, critical thinking, analytical writing, and problem solving skills they need to prepare for and succeed in today’s world.
- These assessments provide important information as to whether students are on track to pursue college and career by the time they graduate from high school. The tests provide timely and actionable student information so that teachers and schools can adjust and improve teaching to ensure students have the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in school and beyond.

What results can we expect from the Smarter Balanced Tests?

- The new tests are too fundamentally different from the old exams to make any reliable comparisons between old scores and new. This year’s results will establish a new baseline for the progress we expect students to make over time.
- Based on trial runs of the new assessments in California and other states, many if not most students will need to make significant progress to reach the standards set for math and literacy that accompany college and career readiness.
- Over time, as students experience multiple years of instruction related to the skills tested by the new assessments, California’s results will show improved achievement. (In 2002, California’s new STAR tests also set a new baseline for achievement and student results improved quickly over time.)

- Parents will receive a report of their child’s scores. But no student, parent or teacher should be discouraged by these new baseline scores, which will not be used to determine whether a student moves on to the next grade. Rather, the scores will represent an opportunity to focus on the needs of students and support teachers and schools in their work to achieve college and career readiness.

How will this system help improve teaching and learning?

- The Smarter Balanced assessments are an academic check-up, designed to give teachers the feedback they need to improve instruction. The tests measure critical thinking, analytical writing, problem solving, and subject area knowledge, providing teachers with multiple sources of actionable information about student strengths and areas where students need additional support.
- The system provides two types of interim assessments that teachers and schools can use to assess student learning at key points in the instructional year and to measure student preparedness for year-end summative tests. Both of these tests provide information for teachers to adjust and differentiate teaching in response to the results.
- The system provides a Digital Library of professional learning and instructional resources to help teachers assess individual student learning during instruction, provide feedback to students in a timely manner, and adjust teaching and learning as needed.