



REAL LEARNING FOR REAL LIFE

Frequently Asked Questions: Testing with Smarter Balanced

How will Washington's state tests change with the new Washington State K-12 Learning Standards for English language arts and math?

In 2011, Washington, adopted new learning standards in English language arts and math (known as the Common Core State Standards). The 2014-15 school year is the first that the new standards have been taught to all students. Tests designed to measure how well students know the standards are called the Smarter Balanced assessments. These tests will be administered to all students in grades 3-8 and 11 starting in 2014-15. They replace the Measurements of Student Progress (MSP) exams in reading, writing and math for grades 3-8, as well as the High School Proficiency Exams in reading and writing.

Which tests will students take this school year (spring 2015)?

In the 2014-15 school year:

- Students in grades 3-8 will take the Smarter Balanced tests in English language arts and math.
- Students in grades 5 and 8 will also take the science MSP.
- Students in grade 11 will take the Smarter Balanced tests in English Language arts and math.
- Students in grade 10 will take the Smarter Balanced English language arts test to fulfill their ELA assessment graduation requirement. Tenth graders will also take a math and a biology end-of-course test unless they have already fulfilled the math and/or biology assessment graduation requirement in a previous grade. Students are required to pass one state math exam and the biology exam to be eligible to graduate.

Why do we need standardized tests like Smarter Balanced or our other state exams?

Standardized tests are aligned to what students are learning in the class. Parents and teachers value these tests as independent, objective measures of how students are doing. Clear, understandable test scores help teachers and parents work together to adjust their approach and better meet students' needs. Standardized tests also provide some of the education data that we use to determine, for example, what's working in special education, or whether race- or income-based achievement gaps continues to persist. Both state and federal laws also mandate that all schools use a common measure in these few subject areas for school and district accountability.

Will be new Smarter Balanced tests be harder than our current state exams?

Yes, but that's because they are aligned to the new more challenging learning standards (Common Core State Standards), which are designed to better prepare students to be ready for college and /or careers when they graduate. Our current state exams measure basic skills.

Will the number of students meeting standard be lower on the new Smarter Balanced exams compared to our current state exams?

It's not an apples-to-apples comparison. These are a new set of learning standards and tests, so one should not compare new scores with the old ones. Because Common Core State Standards are more difficult than our former state learning standards, student test scores may initially be lower than what students, parents and teachers have seen in the past. Smarter Balanced exams set a new baseline for student performance, measuring the skills and knowledge students need to succeed after high school, including problem-solving, writing and critical thinking.

What makes the new Smarter Balanced tests better than our current state exams?

The new Smarter Balanced tests are aligned to the new learning standards. They include multiple choice questions and performance tasks designed to measure skills like research, listening, and communicating reasoning. The tests require students to apply their knowledge to real-world problems and write persuasively. The tests are “Computer-adaptive,” so the computer automatically adjusts the difficulty of the questions as the student is taking the test. Parts of the test are graded by scorers and other parts are machine scored so the results will be returned faster than our previous tests. Because the assessments are better, and we get the results faster, teachers and parents can actually use the results to help students.

The new Smarter Balanced tests are:

- Being used by more than 20 states. All the states (and one territory) using the Smarter Balanced exams have also agreed to use a common cut scores for reporting of student performance. That means that student performance will truly be comparable across states in all grades.
- Innovative, with accommodations for English Language Learners and students with disabilities that make the tests more accessible without compromising what they are designed to measure.
- Developed by states, for states. In the past, assessments were developed by individual states; pooling resources reduces the cost of our assessment program. Washington state teachers are involved in every step of the design process:
<http://www.k12.wa.us/SMARTER/DigitalLibrary.aspx>
- Better quality. Three independent studies have found the new exams to be superior to current state exams in measuring deeper learning and higher-order skills.

Take a practice test and see for yourself. Here’s the link: <http://www.smarterbalanced.org/pilot-test>.