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# PARENTS' GUIDE TO ASSESSMENTS IN CALIFORNIA

In the 2014-15 school year, California rolled out the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) System, which features new assessments aligned to the Common Core State Standards. The new assessments, which include tests developed by the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium for grades 3-8 and 11, gauge how well students are mastering the standards—and ultimately how ready they are for the next grade and for college and careers after graduation.

## 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.

More than 200 colleges and universities across the country have agreed to use students' scores from the Smarter Balanced high school test as part of college placement. This means that high school students who take the test in 11th grade have an opportunity to jumpstart their college coursework and bypass remedial courses.

All of California's public university systems—community colleges, California state universities and the University of California—recognize the 11th grade test as a good measurement of college readiness.

## 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.*

For more information, and a list of participating colleges, visit:

[smarterbalanced.org/higher-education](http://smarterbalanced.org/higher-education)

## THIS GUIDE INCLUDES:

- Overview of the Smarter Balanced assessments, which measure student proficiency against more rigorous standards
- Overview of accountability for students, teachers and schools
- Additional resources for parents

## What is different about the new summative assessments?

The new assessments for English language arts (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**. More than 4,700 educators have contributed to the development and continuous improvement of Smarter Balanced assessments as a resource to improve teaching and learning.

### New English language arts 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 mathematics assessments:

- Go beyond multiple-choice questions and present students with multi-step problems, conceptual questions and real-world applications
- Ask students to get answers correct, and also explain how they arrived at those answers
- Cover fewer topics in greater depth, focusing on the most critical areas



*Note: California administered a field test of the new assessments in spring 2014 to 3.2 million students, which gave teachers, administrators and students practice taking the test. It also identified areas where technology upgrades were needed. When the first real test was administered in 2015 to 3.2 million students, all of them took it online except 900 who used paper and pencil. Support for the test remains high in California among educators, parents, students, community and business leaders. In 2015, only 1% of parents chose to have their child opt-out of the test.*

# 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.
- California has transitioned 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. This method provides students with a more engaging test experience, is more time-efficient, and—especially for low- or high-achieving students—produces more accurate results than traditional methods.
- 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 is to make the assessments more accessible and to produce results that are valid for all students. The intention is not to give any students 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.



▶ **NOTE: While taking advantage of technology, new assessments are designed to work with the computing resources in schools today. The assessments work fine on very old operating systems and require minimal processors and memory. However, states that have not yet made the transition to online testing are offered a paper-and-pencil option for the first three years.**

## College Readiness Defined

Students who perform at the college-ready level in English language arts/literacy demonstrate reading, writing, listening and research skills necessary for introductory courses in a variety of disciplines. They also demonstrate subject-area knowledge and skills associated with readiness for entry-level, transferable, credit-bearing English and composition courses.

Students who perform at the college content-ready level in mathematics demonstrate foundational mathematical knowledge and quantitative reasoning skills necessary for introductory courses in a variety of disciplines. They also demonstrate subject-area knowledge and skills associated with readiness for entry-level, transferable, credit-bearing mathematics and statistics courses.

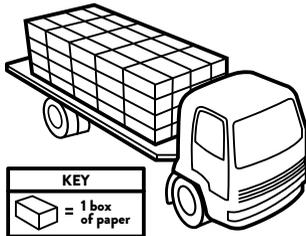
# Sample Questions

The following questions are representative of those found on the new assessments. For more examples visit:

[smarterbalanced.org/sample-items-and-performance-tasks](https://smarterbalanced.org/sample-items-and-performance-tasks)

## FIFTH-GRADE MATHEMATICS

The bed of a truck is stacked with boxes of paper. The boxes are stacked 5 boxes deep by 4 boxes high by 4 boxes across, as shown in the picture.



- When the driver is in the **empty** truck, the mass is 2948.35 kilograms.
- The mass of 1 box of paper is 22.5 kilograms.
- The driver delivers some of the boxes of paper at his first stop.
- The truck has to drive over a bridge on the way to the next stop.
- Trucks with a mass greater than 4700 kilograms are not allowed to drive over the bridge.

Enter the **minimum** number of boxes of paper the driver must deliver at the first stop to be allowed to drive over the bridge.

Navigation icons: left arrow, right arrow, and close (X).

1	2	3
4	5	6
7	8	9
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## SIXTH-GRADE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

A student is writing a report about sleep. Read both sources and the directions that follow.

### Source 1: "During Sleep" by Dr. Howard Dell

If you are like some people, you may think that sleep is a process during which the body and brain shut off, but this is not the case. The body goes through a series of stages during sleep in which body and brain activity change. Most of these changes are not noticed nor remembered. However, sleep does usually follow a pattern. Muscle activity and breathing slow in the initial stages of sleep. The body's temperature also decreases. Sometimes during sleep, the heart can begin to beat more quickly, blood pressure can rise, and many muscles experience small movements. These changes often happen during dreams.

### Source 2: What Happens While You Sleep

SLEEP STAGE	DESCRIPTION
Stage 1 Light Sleep	The muscles relax, eye movement slows and thoughts begin to fade. A person may be easily awakened.
Stage 2 Light Sleep	Eye movement stops, and a person can experience brief dreams. Body temperature begins dropping and heart rate slows.
Stage 3 Moderate-Deep Sleep	The body temperature lowers, and a person is difficult to awaken.
Stage 4 Deep Sleep	The brain uses less energy. The body temperature lowers more than in moderate-deep sleep. A person may sleepwalk.
REM Sleep (REM = rapid eye movement)	Most dreams occur during this stage. The brain uses energy as eyes move quickly, even though the eyelids are closed. Heart rate and blood pressure increase, but many of the large body muscles are inactive.

The student took notes about information in the sources. Select **two** notes that correctly paraphrase, or restate, information from **both** sources.

- We dream several times each night.
- People can be easily awakened from sleep.
- We do not remember what happens during sleep.
- People can sleepwalk during a stage of deep sleep.
- Our bodies and brains continue to work during sleep.
- During some stages of sleep, our bodies decrease in activity.



## ELEVENTH-GRADE ENGLISH-LANGUAGE ARTS

A student is writing a report on a science project for astronomy class about the planet Jupiter. The student wants to revise the draft to have a better conclusion. Read the draft of the report and complete the task that follows.

Orbiting the sun at an average distance of 500 million miles, Jupiter is the largest planet in our solar system. To gain an understanding of truly how massive Jupiter is, we can compare it to the very planet we inhabit: Earth. With a mass of  $5.97219 \times 10^{24}$  kg, Earth is approximately 318 times less massive than Jupiter, which also has a volume equivalent to 1,321 Earths.

In fact, Jupiter is so large that its mass is more than twice that of all the other planets in our solar system combined. Even from 400 million miles away, the planet is large enough to be seen in the night sky and is bright enough to cast a shadow on Earth.

Moreover, the famous red spot we have seen in countless satellite images and artist depictions is, at its widest, around 3 times wider than our planet. Meanwhile, one of Jupiter's 67 moons, Ganymede, has a diameter 8% larger than that of the planet Mercury.

Choose the conclusion that best explains the significance of the informational text.

- However, in 2013, astronomers discovered a new planet, HD 106906b, which was estimated to have a mass 11 times greater than that of Jupiter.
- After Mercury, Venus, Earth, and Mars, Jupiter is the fifth planet from the sun. Indeed, the larger planets – Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune – are the four most distant.
- It is partially because of Jupiter's enormous size that the Earth is not frequently bombarded by large meteorites. Meteors of this kind are often diverted away from Earth's trajectory to Jupiter's substantial gravitational field. In this regard, Jupiter is Earth's protector.
- In 1994, a large comet broke apart and collided with Jupiter in what was the first direct observation of two Solar System objects colliding. The impact left a scar that remained visible for several months afterward.



# What Parents Can Expect

The Smarter Balanced assessments are designed to measure the new, more rigorous expectations of the state standards. Because the tests measure complex skills, which are different from the skills measured by previous state tests, scores on the Smarter Balanced test will look lower. But students aren't doing worse—it's just that the bar is higher.

As students and teachers gain the skills and knowledge needed to meet the new higher standards, performance will also improve. In other states where more rigorous tests have been implemented, students improved their performance after the first year.

## SCORE REPORTS

The score report gives you a snapshot of how your child is progressing and shows where he or she excels or needs more support. This information, along with grades, teacher feedback and scores on other tests, will help give a more complete picture of how well your child is performing academically. The new score reports describing students' results on the new tests will be very different from what we've seen in the past. Scores will be different because the English language arts and math tests are based on a different set of academic standards. While no single test tells us everything we need to know about how a student is performing in school, these test scores, along with information about students' work in the classroom, give you the information you need to know about how your child is progressing.

Here is what you can expect to learn from the report:

- Your child's overall score in the subject area
- What this overall score means
- Your child's strengths and areas for improvement in certain topics in each subject area
- How well your child performed compared to other students in the school, district, state and other states

*State score reports may differ depending on the type of assessment a state utilizes and also whether or not it chooses to customize the report. States will report scores in several ways, which can serve different purposes for their stakeholders.*

## Understanding the Smarter Balanced Assessment Score Card

**Scale scores** are the basic units of reporting. These scores, which fall along a continuous vertical scale (from approximately 2,000 to 3,000) that increases across grade levels, can be used to illustrate students' current level of achievement and their growth over time in a relatively fine-grained fashion. When aggregated, these scores can also describe school- or district-level changes in performance on the tests, and can measure gaps in achievement among different groups of students.

**Achievement level descriptors (ALDs)** for English language arts/Literacy (ELA/Literacy) and mathematics are aligned with the Common Core State Standards and the Smarter Balanced assessment claims. The purpose of these descriptors is to specify, in content terms, the knowledge and skills that students display at four levels of achievement (i.e., Level 1, Level 2, Level 3 and Level 4), which in some contexts may also be described qualitatively in terms such as "novice, developing, proficient, advanced," or others.



## How are students held accountable?

In January 2016, the California State Legislature suspended the use of the California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE) as a graduation requirement. 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.

## How will schools support students during the transition?

Schools have created a variety of models to assist students who are struggling with the standards. Remediation and summer courses, in-class adjustments based on ongoing in-class assessment results, and pull-out tutoring are just a few support strategies.

## How are teachers held accountable?

Teacher evaluations are administered at the local school and district level. Local administrators are in the process of refining their accountability plans and are working with parents, teachers and the community to determine the best systems for ensuring teachers are effectively helping students meet the new standards.

## How are schools held accountable?

California's Accountability Progress Report (APR) shares information with parents and the public about the state Academic Performance Index (API), the local district Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), district-level Program Improvement (PI) and cohort graduation rates.

# Take Action

**Parents are their child's best advocates. As a parent and your child's first teacher, you should be informed of the assessment and accountability system that is in place in your child's school. Parents and families must be at the table with school leaders and school districts to ensure that testing is implemented well and with enough resources to ensure success.**

California should include parents and teachers in thoughtful conversations based on trust, collaboration and respect. For additional details about the assessment and accountability system, please contact the California Department of Education, (916) 319-0800.

Here are some questions you might want to ask:

- How many assessments will my child take this school year, and where can I access/view the assessment calendar?
- What will happen if my child does not meet proficiency levels on the new assessments?
- How will the results of tests be used to support my child's learning?
- What can I do, as a parent, to help my child do his or her best?
- How will school evaluations be affected based on results of the new assessments?

Also, be sure to speak with your local school administrators! Ask them to host a parent night in the spring to explain the tests, and in the fall to explain test results.

Below is the list of policies and practices that National PTA supports. Check with the California Department of Education to determine if the state's policies and practices are aligned.

- National PTA believes that valid assessment does not consist of only a single test score, and that at no time should a single test be considered the sole determinant of a student's academic or work future.
- National PTA supports nationally agreed-upon voluntary standards if they are derived by consensus at the state and local levels. Parents must be involved in this process.
- National PTA believes that assessments provide valuable information to parents, teachers and school leaders about the growth and achievement of their students. Furthermore, having annual data on the performance of students can help inform teaching and learning as well as identify achievement gaps among groups of students within a school and among school districts. National PTA believes assessments are essential to ensure that all students receive a high-quality education.

# Preparing and Supporting Your Child

- Review the testing calendar and work with your child’s school to ensure there will be regular and clear communications from the school on the assessments, the results and how they are used.
- Discuss the new tests with your child. Make sure he or she feels comfortable and understands the importance of taking tests
- Make sure your child has a comfortable place for studying and is prepared mentally and physically for a test.
- With older children, explain that the new assessments were created to make sure they are on track to succeed after graduation, and to identify any issues early enough to give them more support.
- Explain to your child that the tests will initially be more challenging. Tell your child you have high expectations, and that you and the teachers are there to help every step of the way.
- Review test results with your child and his or her teacher.

## Staying informed and involved:

- To become familiar with California’s standards, visit: [cde.ca.gov/re/cc](http://cde.ca.gov/re/cc)
- To see samples of new test questions and how the assessments were developed, visit: [smarterbalanced.org/practice-test](http://smarterbalanced.org/practice-test)
- Read all comments written by the teacher. Ask teachers to explain anything that is unclear, and discuss how you can best work together to address areas of improvement for your child.
- Monitor your child’s progress and regularly communicate with your child’s teachers. 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.
- Tests are not perfect measures of what a child can do—there are many other factors that might influence a test score. For example, a child can be affected by the way he or she is feeling on test day, or the particular classroom setting.
- Meet with your child’s teacher as often as possible to discuss his or her progress. Ask for activities to do at home to help prepare for tests and improve your child’s proficiency.

## Additional Resources

- For more information on the Smarter Balanced consortium, of which California is a member, visit: [smarterbalanced.org](http://smarterbalanced.org)