

New Assessment Frequently Asked Questions

What are the new assessments?

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

Why were 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 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.

How were these new assessments developed?

Educators from kindergarten through grade 12 were deeply involved in the design, testing, and scoring of these new assessments. California conducted both pilot and statewide field tests of the new assessments in 2013 and 2014.

How are the new assessments an improvement over previous statewide tests?

The new assessment system uses online tests, providing students with a wider range of questions tailored to more accurately identify the knowledge and skills individual students have developed. It is designed to measure student growth over time, which was not possible in California's previous system.

The assessments include performance tasks that challenge students to demonstrate critical thinking and problem solving, and to apply their knowledge and skills to real-world problems. They are aligned with the skills students need to start taking college courses.

The computer-based testing include accommodations that will give all students—including English learners and students with disabilities—the opportunity to fully demonstrate their knowledge and mastery of the state standards in English language arts and mathematics.

Because the tests are online, results will be available to teachers, schools, and school districts more quickly than in the past, allowing educators more time to plan professional development and fine-tune curriculum and instruction.

What will the new assessments measure?

The new assessments will provide help in measuring students' knowledge of the subject matter as well as critical-thinking, analytical-writing, and problem-solving skills. They will provide important information about whether students are on track to succeed in college and the workforce by the time they graduate from high school.

The results are only one source of information we will be using regarding student progress. Teachers will also gather other valuable information about each student's learning through classroom assessment and daily student work.

What results can we expect from the new assessments?

New standards in English and math set higher expectations for students, and the new tests are designed to assess student performance against those higher standards, raising the bar for all students.

It should not be surprising if fewer students score within the top tiers on the testing spectrum considering the increased rigor. This does not mean that students have fallen behind or learned less. It simply means that we're expecting more from them and aligning what's being taught in the classroom with what they will need to know when entering college or the workforce.

The new assessments are fundamentally too different from the old exams to make any reliable comparisons between previous scores and new ones. Rather, this year's results will establish a baseline for the progress we expect students to make over time.

Think of it as pushing the reset button on assessment results—getting a fresh start.

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, student performance on the assessments is expected to improve as results are used to help shape professional learning and lesson planning.

How will this system help improve teaching and learning?

The new 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 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 annual tests each spring. Both of these assessments 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.

How can parents help?

Learning doesn't end in the classroom, and parents can help provide support and a home environment that will help children succeed at school.

There are a variety of ways parents can help students prepare for these new assessments. A good start is to run through one of the practice tests available on www.smarterbalanced.org with children and ask them to explain their reasoning as they select answers. Helping children learn important computer skills such as typing and mouse control can also help them navigate the online assessments.

To encourage children to think critically as called for in the new standards, parents can ask their children to analyze whatever they are reading and to support their answers with information from the book.

Other strategies that can be helpful depending on a child's age include reading to them or encouraging them to read, discussing their day at school, playing word games, helping them understand academic vocabulary, setting high expectations, focusing on the process rather than the answer, encouraging them to see math in the real world and asking children to explain why they think a certain answer is correct.

How do these assessments tie in with the new standards and funding formula?

The new assessments are part of a larger plan for ensuring high-quality teaching and learning in every school. The plan also includes 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.

What will the new assessments look like for students?

After logging on to a computer, students will answer questions in clusters with the ability to flag and return to ones they weren't sure about. There will be about 60 questions in the first part of the two-part assessment. Depending on whether students answer the questions correctly or not, the test will adjust with easier or more difficult questions.

Students will take the second part of the assessment on another day. It includes the performance tasks, which will require students to complete more in-depth projects that demonstrate analytical skills and real-world problem solving.

Will the assessments be in languages other than English?

The mathematics portion will be available in other languages. The English language arts portion will only be available in English; however, students whose primary language isn't English will be supported through tools such as English dictionaries, pop-up glossaries, and translated test directions.

How will the assessments accommodate students with disabilities?

Students with disabilities can use a variety of accommodations depending on their Individualized Education Program, including American Sign Language, braille, speech-to-text support, an abacus, and alternate response options.

What happened to the API?

The Academic Performance Index (API) for schools and districts has been suspended until at least fall of 2016, so there will be no API scores calculated from this year's tests. Parents will still get score reports for their students.

California Education Code now requires the calculation of the API to be based on multiple measures and not only on annual assessments.

According to the law, no more than 60 percent of API can be based on assessment results. The remaining 40 percent needs to be based on other college and career indicators, including college entrance exams, accelerated coursework, attendance, early indicators of college readiness, innovative measures, course taking behaviors, and career preparedness.