

# The Common Core Approach To Assessment

toolkits

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With the Common Core Standards, we are witness to not only a dramatic shift in our educational system, but a paradigm shift in how students can learn: giving them the knowledge and tools they need to succeed in the 21st century.

Advances in technology, coupled with innovative assessment task design, make it possible for us to obtain a richer, more nuanced picture of what students know than ever before. Different stakeholders, however, will set different priorities for how student knowledge is assessed. Some value snapshots of what students can do at fixed points in time while others value multiple points of data that can be used to evaluate schools and teachers systemically. Most want formal assessments to be as short and inexpensive as possible, while others would trade some cost and time efficiency to have more authentic, complex, and reliable tasks.

No single assessment can optimally serve all possible purposes. The need for formative information is often at odds with the need for data that can be used to evaluate teacher or school effectiveness. Tasks that model good instruction are not always consistent with desires for tests to be as short as possible and for scores to be returned immediately.

We should think of systems of assessments rather than individual tests, as this is likely the only way to satisfy the various information needs identified by stakeholders.

The Common Core State Standards will ultimately be the basis for an assessment system that will include multiple measures of student performance. Once states agree on the final standards, attention will be turned to creating a high quality system of measurement that would include proper incentives for teachers to teach these standards and a variety of assessments that will reinforce teaching and learning tied to the agreed upon expectations.

While the national adoption of the Common Core Standards themselves is huge, the potential impact of having a shared national assessment system is even bigger. Many educators will need to completely overhaul their approach in order for their students to succeed on these assessments. What has once been acceptable when it comes to test prep will no longer be enough.

A new, next generation assessment program will accompany the Common Core State Standards. These assessments range far beyond the usual multiple-choice and short-answer questions. Instead, students will have to apply their knowledge to real-world situations through performance events and work in interdisciplinary situations. They will have to be able to use technology with facility. Some performance events will take weeks to complete.

For teachers, this new form of evaluation means developing a full understanding of performance events, how to construct them, and how to evaluate student work. In order to prepare students for such assessments, teachers will have to give students ample practice in this style of evaluation. In addition, the new assessments require teachers to make substantial use of formative assessment techniques. Final results for each student will comprise a combination of performance events, in-course assessments, and more conventional standardized tests. Other criteria for these new assessments make challenging demands on the types of development and delivery.

Part of the assessment process also includes documenting that students are on track to becoming college- and career-ready by the time they graduate from high school. This aspect of the assessments means that higher education institutions will be partners in the development of the new high school tests to ensure that the assessment system is anchored to success in college and careers.

The assessments must reflect and support good instruction, and include all students from the outset — English learners, economically disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities. Therefore, not only will students learn from a more rigorous and relevant set of standards, students will also be introduced to a new type of assessment that is significantly different from the types of state assessment items in most current state tests. This approach is rooted in the belief that stronger learning will result from high-quality assessments that support ongoing improvements in instruction and learning, and that are educative for students, parents, teachers, school administrators, members of the public, and policymakers.

These assessments will reflect the best kind of classroom instruction and student work and that can contribute to decisions about student, educator, school, and state performance against the Common Core State Standards. In mathematics, the assessments will measure the topics necessary for future learning, and in literacy, students will conduct research leading to the writing of essays, which will eventually be presented to classmates. The crucial factor is that the formative assessment results will, with the assistance of technology, be rapidly returned in a manner easily understood. This will set the stage for continuous improvement in classrooms and schools. Educators will be adjusting instruction continuously in response to student performance, thus maximizing student learning and keeping learners on track to meet college- and career-ready standards by the end of their high school years.

Assessment is not a one-time event. Besides summative and formative assessment, there can also be in-course or benchmark assessment. All three can work together to help give a complete picture of where a student is and where that student is headed on the learning progressions.

The pressure placed on students, teachers, and school administrators will be greater than ever. For the first time in educational history states will be able to accurately compare their students' achievement to students in neighboring states. This will force politicians to increase funding in and focus on education as no one will want their state to be amongst the low performers.

With the Common Core assessments, teachers will have to increase rigor in the classroom by challenging their students to think critically. Students must excel in critical thinking if they are to perform well on these assessments. Teachers will have to restructure how they teach to develop these skills. In the end, this shift in educational philosophy will better prepare our students to succeed. More students will be ready to transition to college or will be work ready when they graduate high school. In addition, the skills associate with the Common Core State Standards will prepare students to compete on the global level.

Another benefit of a shared assessment system will be that costs to individual states will be reduced dramatically. With a common set of assessments, states will be able to share in the cost of test development, production, scoring, etc., freeing up more money to go into other areas of education.

Students will take benchmark assessments at the beginning of the year, with the option of ongoing progress monitoring throughout the year, and then a final summative assessment towards the end of the school year. This type of assessment will allow teachers to more readily respond to a particular student's needs to better prepare them for that summative assessment. The assessments will be computer-based, allowing for quicker, more accurate results and feedback on the computer scored portion of the assessments.

Students will see a variety of item types including:

- innovative constructed response;
- extended performance tasks; and
- selected response.

These are more difficult than simple multiple-choice questions as students will be assessed on multiple standards within one question. Students will often be expected to defend their work through a constructed essay response.

The transition to these types of assessments will be difficult. Many students will struggle initially. This will not be because of a lack of effort on teachers, but will be based more on the overwhelming task at hand. This transition will take time. Understanding what the Common Core Standards are all about and what to expect from the assessments are the first steps in a long process of being successful. While posing some interesting challenges considering the limited computer and technology resources available to some schools, these assessments will be better aligned to college and career readiness. Student attainment of the standards will be observable and verifiable, with the standards themselves being used to develop broader assessment frameworks

The shift to online assessment will also accelerate the need for high-access environments in order for to take advantage of enhanced assessment items. Devices by themselves will not transform education but they are a necessary and vital component of a strategy to deliver the opportunities afforded by digital learning.

With thoughtful and well-developed models, educational leaders can determine a plan for investing in devices and meet multiple goals simultaneously—expanding student access to devices, enriching curriculum with new content and delivery methods, preparing for the shift to online assessments, and making sound financial investments in the future of education.

Because most states are in the process of planning for the shift to online testing, districts should consult with their state education agencies. Both state testing consortia (PARCC and Smarter Balanced) will use online assessments and have established device guidelines including size, speed, and resolution.

In addition to national and state leadership, local leaders must have a full-scale implementation strategy that begins and ends not with devices, but with student learning. Without a detailed plan for the utilization of technology to personalize and extend learning in new and meaningful ways, dollars spent putting these tools in the hands of students and teachers will be wasted.

The focus of the digital movement must remain squarely on the big picture of improved learning opportunities for students. While devices are important, we should not get too distracted by the devices and tools themselves. The value comes from the content and experiences that devices allow students to access.