

What Parents Want to Know About the Common Core State Standards & Smarter Balanced Assessments



Eugene School District 4J

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS: What are they and where did they come from?

What are standards? How are they different from curriculum and from assessment?

- **STANDARDS** tell us **WHAT** students need to know and be able to do.
- **CURRICULUM** is **HOW** teachers teach students what they need to learn to reach the standards.
- **ASSESSMENT** is how we **MEASURE** students' knowledge and skills based on the standards.

Educational standards are what students should know and be able to do at each grade level. These clear goals for student learning help teachers ensure their students have the skills and knowledge they need to be successful, and also help parents understand what is expected of their children.

Curriculum is the materials and methods teachers use to teach students what they need to learn. State standards establish what students need to learn, but do not dictate how teachers should teach. Instead, schools and teachers decide how best to help students reach the standards.

Assessment is how student learning is measured. The purpose of assessment—which includes quick teacher check-ins on students' understanding, quizzes, course exams and annual state tests—is to provide students, parents, teachers and other professionals with the information necessary to plan to meet students' instructional needs.

What are the Common Core State Standards?

The Common Core State Standards are shared academic expectations adopted by Oregon and more than 40 other states across the country. They are clear, consistent guidelines for what students should know and be able to do at each grade level in reading, writing and math in order to be ready to graduate with an Oregon diploma, well prepared for college or a career. Oregon adopted these standards in 2010, replacing our state's previous English language arts and mathematics standards.

In the past, every state had its own set of different academic standards, so students at the same grade level were expected to achieve at different levels depending on where they lived. Having the same standards in many states will help all students get a good education and be well prepared for college and the workplace, no matter where they attend school.

How were the Common Core State Standards developed?

The Common Core State Standards were developed in a state-led effort to establish a single set of clear educational standards, tied to college and career readiness, for English language arts/literacy and mathematics in grades K–12. Oregon was among the 48 states that helped to develop the standards. This effort was coordinated by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, who shared a desire to better prepare students for college and careers. The federal government was not involved in the development of the standards.

The standards were designed by a diverse group of educators and educational experts, informed by high-quality research and widespread input from teachers, parents and school administrators across the country. The standards are designed to ensure that students graduating from high school are prepared to go to college or enter careers and that teachers, parents and students have a clear understanding of what is expected of them.

How did the Common Core State Standards come to Oregon?

Our state has been involved in every step of the development of the standards, with parents, teachers and school administrators taking part in the voluntary effort. Oregon educators reviewed various versions of the standards and provided multiple rounds of feedback before they were adopted by our state.

The decision whether to adopt the standards is up to each state. In 2010 the Oregon State Board of Education voted to adopt the Common Core to replace Oregon's previous state standards in math and language arts. Schools have worked on implementing them ever since.

Why are the Common Core State Standards needed?

Before the Common Core State Standards were developed, each state separately developed, adopted and implemented its own set of academic standards. As a result, what students were expected to learn varied widely among states—and many states, including Oregon, had set the bar too low. Far too many students in Oregon and across the country have been graduating from high school unprepared for their next steps.

Compared with other U.S. states, the rigor of Oregon's previous academic expectations, as measured by our state tests, ranked 40th in math and 49th in reading at grade four—and not much higher at other grades. 73% of 4J students who successfully graduate from high school and go on to an Oregon community college need to take remedial courses, meaning they were not ready for college-level work. Students must pay for these courses without earning college credit.

The Common Core State Standards are more rigorous. They establish consistent, high expectations for all students across the more than 40 states that have adopted them. The standards are aligned to college and work expectations and informed by the standards adopted in other top-performing countries—since we know that our graduates will compete in college and careers with students from other states and countries with higher standards. The new standards challenge our schools to teach—and our students to develop—the problem-solving and critical thinking skills needed to be successful in 21st century jobs, in education or training after high school and as well-educated citizens.

How do we know these standards are the right ones?

The standards have been informed by the best available research and evidence. The standards are benchmarked to international standards to prepare our students to be ready for college and careers and competitive in the local, nationwide and emerging global marketplace.

Do the standards tell teachers how to teach? Are they a new national curriculum?

No. State standards establish what students need to learn, but do not dictate how teachers should teach. Instead, local districts, schools and teachers decide how best to help students reach the standards. Teachers have an integral role in determining which curriculum materials will be used school- and district-wide. Teachers also devise lesson plans and tailor instruction to the individual needs of the students in their classrooms.

Curriculum is a broad term that encompasses everything a teacher uses in the classroom from reading and math units to lesson plans to hands-on learning activities. Having consistent standards will allow teachers, schools and districts to share best practices and a variety of curriculum materials from state to state, but the standards don't come with a set curriculum that every teacher must use.

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS: What do they include and how is that different?

What subjects and grade levels are included in the Common Core State Standards?

The standards are for grades K–12. Statewide assessments (state tests) of students' learning based on the standards are completed in grades 3–8 and 11. This is the same as under Oregon's previous standards.

The standards are what students need to know and be able to do at each grade level in mathematics and English language arts (reading and writing), including the literacy skills students need for all subjects. These subjects were chosen because students use these foundational skill sets across other subjects. Students must learn to read, write, speak, listen, reason and use language effectively in all content areas to be ready for college, careers and life.

What is new about the Common Core State Standards?

The standards ask teachers and students to dig deeper into the core skills and concepts for each grade level, and build learning from grade to grade. Teachers will cover subjects in greater depth and will focus on reading and writing, complex thinking and problem solving skills in all subject areas. This gives students an opportunity to better understand and remember what is being taught.

Across the English language arts and mathematics standards, skills critical to each content area are emphasized. In particular, problem solving, collaboration, communication and critical thinking skills are interwoven into the standards.

What differences will you see in language arts (reading and writing)?

Key differences include:

- Regular practice with more complex texts and expanded vocabulary
- Reading and writing assignments that emphasize using evidence from texts
- Extensive use of content-rich informational texts—non-fiction—in addition to fiction
- Real-world examples that make what students are learning more relevant
- Greater focus on reading and writing in all subjects

The standards require that students work with certain critical content, including Shakespeare, foundational American literature, America’s founding documents and classic myths and stories from around the world. However, there is no required reading list. Teachers have the flexibility to make their own decisions about what texts to use. The standards provide examples of high-quality texts that are appropriate for the grade level and compatible with the learning expectations set out in the standards; these serve as useful guideposts in helping educators select texts of similar complexity, quality and range for their own classrooms.

What differences will you see in math?

Key differences include:

- Teaching the concept, procedure and application with equal importance, so students better understand and can apply their learning
- Diving deeper into fewer topics, rather than learning material “a mile wide and an inch deep”
- Building across grades, so students’ learning about each concept starts with a strong foundation and grows over time
- Using math in real-world situations that make what students are learning more relevant
- Engaging students in using and evaluating different methods to solve the same problem
- Increasing expectations of reading, writing and reasoning within mathematics

The mathematics standards stress not only procedural skills but also conceptual understanding, to make sure students learn, absorb and retain the critical understanding they need to succeed at higher levels—rather than learn enough to get by on the next test but forget the material shortly thereafter, only to review it again the following year.

The mathematical progression, or sequencing of topics, presented in the Common Core State Standards is mathematically coherent and based on research on the development of mathematical understanding among children. It is designed to develop the foundational knowledge and skills students need to be college and career ready. In addition to the content covered, the standards call on students to practice reasoning, problem solving, communicating and applying mathematical ways of thinking to real-world issues and challenges.

What differences will you see in other subjects?

Literacy is essential and a shared responsibility across all subject areas. Teachers in all subject areas use their content area expertise to help students meet the particular challenges of reading, writing, speaking, listening, reasoning and using language in their respective fields.

In science, social studies and other subjects, you should expect to see written assignments that ask students to:

- Use more than one source of information
- Use evidence to support their statements
- Read and write well

TRANSITION AND SUPPORT: How are teachers and students adjusting to these changes?

How do the Common Core State Standards impact teachers?

The new standards:

- Change the learning targets our state has established for our students. Teachers are adjusting their teaching practices, materials and expectations to help students meet the new standards.
- Provide teachers with consistent goals and benchmarks to ensure students are progressing on a path for success in college, careers and life.
- Provide consistent expectations for students who move into their classrooms from other districts and states.
- Provide the opportunity to collaborate with teachers across the country as they develop curriculum, materials and assessments linked to high-quality standards.
- Help colleges and professional development programs better prepare teachers.

How are 4J teachers being supported in this transition to the new standards and assessments?

A wide variety of supports have been provided, including:

- Updated curriculum and supplemental resources have been provided to ensure that teachers have access to instructional resources that align to the Common Core State Standards.
- Numerous professional development opportunities have been provided for teachers to learn, collaborate and dig into the standards over the past four years, with further opportunities to come.
- Training in the literacy standards that apply to all content areas has been provided for all teachers.
- Teachers receive ongoing support in their implementation of research-based teaching strategies that help students reach the new learning goals, such as inquiry-based teaching, strategies for promoting discourse and productive struggle, AVID strategies and making student thinking visible.
- Each school has a trained school test coordinator who is training teachers on the policies and procedures for Smarter Balanced test administration.
- Teachers have been provided with training opportunities and access to practice tests and interim assessments to familiarize themselves and their students with the new test format.

How are students being supported in this transition to the new standards and assessments?

State standards and state tests are nothing new. However, Oregon's expectations and assessments of student learning in reading, writing and math are changing. Students are being supported in these changes in a variety of ways.

All students: Many supports, resources and interventions are in place and continue to be developed and implemented for all students and particularly those who struggle. Students have opportunities to develop keyboarding skills and take practice tests to become familiar with the style of test they will take. Classroom teachers will work with students to meet individual learning needs. Parents should contact their child's teachers to discuss any particular needs or concerns.

Students with disabilities or special education needs: For students who have identified educational needs under IDEA or Section 504, the Smarter Balanced assessments include opportunities for universal tools, designated supports and specific accommodations. For every student with an individualized education program or 504 plan, the individual accommodations and supports are identified and listed as part of the annual IEP or 504 process. If you have already had an IEP or 504 meeting and you feel that accommodations and supports for state testing were not fully addressed, please contact your case manager or the 504 coordinator in your student's school.

English language learners (ELL): English language development teachers use English language proficiency (ELP) standards to guide instruction. These new standards are written to support the type of language students need to know to be successful in content-area classes and the new assessments. Teachers create instructional activities that support growth toward all of the ELP standards. Teachers keep in mind students' language proficiency, and provide instruction that builds language and works towards helping students meet these standards and transfer these academic skills to their content-area classes and assessments. ELL and classroom teachers work together to implement the state standards in their classrooms, with ELL teachers providing support in small group instruction as well.

Talented and gifted (TAG) students: Teachers work to help our TAG students articulate their thinking. Many of these students find that the answers often come easily but it's more challenging to show the thinking that goes into coming up with the answer. The Smarter Balanced items are rigorous and require students to describe their higher-level thinking. Teachers are providing multiple opportunities for students to practice describing their thinking and problem solving process.

SMARTER BALANCED ASSESSMENTS: Oregon's new state tests of reading, writing and math

What is assessment?

Assessment is how student learning is measured. The purpose of assessment—which includes quick teacher check-ins on students' understanding, quizzes, course exams and annual state tests—is to provide students, parents, teachers and other professionals with the information necessary to plan to meet students' instructional needs.

Will the new standards mean new tests?

Yes. New standards require new tools to measure student learning, aligned to the new standards. Oregon's state tests for reading, writing and math will assess student learning based on the Common Core State Standards beginning in spring 2015.

What are the Smarter Balanced assessments?

The new tests that replace Oregon's previous state tests for reading, writing and math in the Oregon Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (OAKS) were developed by the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, a state-led partnership including Oregon and about 20 other states. They are referred to as the Smarter Balanced assessments.

This new generation of tests is more interactive, engaging and individualized. Students' knowledge and skills are assessed in a variety of ways, including open-response questions and performance tasks. Multiple-choice sections are adaptive to each student's ability level, not one-size-fits-all.

The new Smarter Balanced tests also are expected to provide more detailed and useful information about students' learning progress than the old OAKS tests did. Parents will receive more information about their students' progress toward being ready for the next school level, college and careers. Teachers, schools and districts will receive more useful diagnostic information that can be used to support individual students and improve our instructional program.

When will students take the Smarter Balanced assessments?

Oregon students complete statewide assessments (state tests) of math and language arts in grades 3–8 and 11, in the spring. This is the same as with Oregon's previous OAKS assessments. Students will take the test for their grade only once, rather than retaking it multiple times as many students did with the old OAKS tests.

In 2015, 4J schools will have students complete the Smarter Balanced assessments in April–May, and possibly June.

Can I opt my student out of the state tests?

Under certain limited circumstances, yes. You may request an exemption from state testing to accommodate your student's IDEA or Section 504 identified disability or sincerely held religious beliefs. Schools are required by law to administer statewide assessments to assess students' learning; disabilities and religious beliefs are the only bases on which an Oregon school district may approve an exemption. A frequently-asked-questions document and exemption request form are available.

Will these new tests be harder?

The new standards are more rigorous and the new tests may seem more challenging at first. However, the multiple-choice sections are computer adaptive, adjusting the difficulty to each student's ability level as the test is taking place. The new tests also go beyond asking students to fill in multiple choice questions. They give students multiple ways to demonstrate their knowledge and skills and provide a more authentic assessment of what they know and can do.

Because the bar has been set higher, we expect to find that many students will not yet show proficiency in the standards at their grade level as measured by the new assessments. This is normal and expected, and it will not have negative consequences for students. Over time, students and teachers will continue to make progress in meeting the higher expectations and we are confident that we will see an increase in students' proficiency rates, just as we have seen in the past and in other states that have raised expectations. As a result of the new assessments, students, parents and educators will have information about how students are doing on a college and career readiness trajectory, and will be able to make individualized adjustments to improve student readiness.

What does it mean that the Smarter Balanced assessments are computerized adaptive tests (CATs)?

The multiple-choice sections of each assessment aren't one-size-fits-all, they're computer adaptive. This means that the computer testing system chooses questions based on each test taker's responses on earlier items in the test, avoiding questions that are far too easy or too difficult for that student. Computer adaptive tests are tailored to each student's knowledge and ability and are shorter than equivalent traditional paper-and-pencil tests. The old OAKS tests were computer-based as well, so Oregon students are already accustomed to using a computer to complete state tests.

Will a student's ability to read and write effectively affect his or her score in mathematics?

The scoring for open-response math questions is based only on the student's demonstrated understanding of the mathematical content and practices essential to the task. This allows for writing errors that don't detract from the demonstration of the student's level of understanding. Please note that many mathematics questions will allow the student to use the "text-to-speech" feature in the online testing system to have the directions read aloud to the student if the school has determined that the student may need this accommodation.

How are student responses to Smarter Balanced assessment questions scored?

Answers to the selected-response questions in the assessment are scored automatically by computer. Answers to open-response questions and performance tasks are scored by humans. The people scoring the tasks, many of them teachers from the states in the Smarter Balanced consortium, have received training on how to fairly and consistently score each specific type of question.

Are Smarter Balanced assessment scores comparable across states?

Yes. The tests are the same and scores are comparable across all states using the Smarter Balanced assessments. In addition, the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) is collaborating with the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), the other large consortium of states creating new state tests, to make PARCC and SBAC scores comparable, allowing for valid comparison across a majority of U.S. states.

Have the Smarter Balanced assessments been tested and validated?

Yes. The process to create and evaluate Smarter Balanced test questions is very similar to the process followed by the creators of other standardized tests such as the SAT, ACT, GRE, etc., and has involved a large number of educators from Oregon (including from Eugene) and other states participating in the Smarter Balanced consortium. The Smarter Balanced assessments have been created following the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* created jointly by the American Educational Research Association, the American Psychological Association and the National Council on Measurement in Education.

In 2014, 4.2 million students across 16,549 schools participated in the field test of the Smarter Balanced assessments, answering questions that will be included in the assessments in 2014–15 and beyond. This was the largest field test of a new assessment in the history of the United States.

Do state tests, including the Smarter Balanced assessments, have consequences for students?

For students in grades 3 to 8 there are no consequences for not achieving a certain score on the Smarter Balanced assessments. A student's results from the Smarter Balanced assessments are a valuable source of information about whether the student is on track for high school readiness, graduation, college and careers, and where his or her school,

teachers and parents can focus on providing additional learning support. But these test scores will have no effect on a student's class grades, number of credits, or advancement to the next grade.

For high school students the answer is more complex. In order to graduate from high school in Oregon, students must demonstrate that they are proficient in the essential skills of reading, writing and math. Most students do this by meeting standards on the state test. If a student does not take the state test or does not achieve the score needed to meet the graduation requirement, he or she must instead demonstrate proficiency either by scoring high enough on another approved standardized assessment, or through completing satisfactory work samples, which likely would require taking an additional class in place of another chosen course or elective.

However, while the new Smarter Balanced assessments are expected to be more challenging than the old OAKS tests for reading, writing and mathematics, the requirement for graduation has not gotten harder to meet. The score current high school students must achieve to meet graduation requirements has been matched to the difficulty level of the benchmark in the old OAKS assessment.

Do state tests, including the Smarter Balanced assessments, have consequences for schools and districts?

Yes. School ratings are based primarily on students' state test participation and results.

The State of Oregon reports the overall assessment performance and assigns an accountability rating (on a scale from 1 to 5) to each public school and district in the state. This school rating is mostly or entirely based on scores and participation rates in state tests. Independent of students' achievement and growth as measured by the assessments, schools and districts that have state testing participation rates below the minimum requirement (94.5% of all students and 94.5% of each subgroup of students) have their overall school rating lowered by one to three levels (out of five).

Schools that receive low ratings face multiple consequences, including administrative intervention by the state in some cases. In addition, a school's rating can influence how a school is perceived and how well it attracts and retains student enrollment and neighborhood residents.

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