



PARENTS' GUIDE TO NEW ASSESSMENTS IN MONTANA

In the 2014-15 school year, Montana rolled out new assessments aligned to the Montana Common Core Standards. The new assessments, which were developed by the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, 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 measure (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 tests 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.

For more information, and a list of participating colleges, visit: smarterbalanced.org/higher-education.

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.

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 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 not only get answers correct, but also explain how they arrived at those answers.
- Cover fewer topics in greater depth, focusing on the most critical areas.



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.
- Montana 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-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.

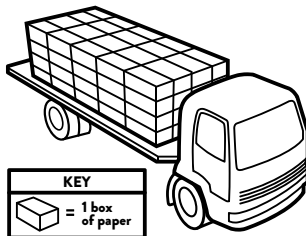
Sample Questions

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

smarterbalanced.org/sample-items-and-performance-tasks

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.

◀ ▶ ✕

1	2	3
4	5	6
7	8	9
0	.	%



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



11TH-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 5.97219×10^{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.

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

- 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 student's overall score in the subject area
- What this overall score means
- Your student's strengths and areas for improvement in certain topics in each subject area
- How well your student 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 Montana Common Core 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?

The tests are not used to prevent students from graduation or grade promotion.

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 and principals held accountable?

Educators are evaluated at the district level. Student test performance is not used as a measure of teacher effectiveness or accountability.

How are schools held accountable?

Montana releases an annual Report Card that provides the public with information on student academic performance, graduation data, the adequate yearly progress of schools and districts and other pertinent school performance information.



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.

Montana should include parents and teachers in thoughtful conversations based on trust, collaboration and respect. For additional details about the assessment and accountability system, please call the Montana Office of Public Instruction, (888) 231-9393.

Here are some questions you might want to consider asking your local school:

- 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 Department of Education to determine if Montana's policies and practices are closely aligned with those of the PTA.

- 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 communication 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 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 you and the teachers are there to help every step of the way.
- Review test results with your child and his or her teacher.
- Make sure your child has a comfortable place for studying and is prepared mentally and physically for a test.

Staying informed and involved:

- Become familiar with Montana's standards, visit: opi.mt.gov/Curriculum/MontCAS/MCCS/index.php
- To see samples of new test questions and how the assessments were developed, visit: 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.
- Remember that 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 Montana is a member, visit: smarterbalanced.org