

Making Assessments Work

Spring 2015

The new Illinois Learning Standards make clear what students must know and be able to do at a time when college and career readiness matters more than ever¹.

But if we raise the bar for students, then we need better ways to answer the question that every parent asks: How is my child doing?

Students benefit when held to high expectations, taught to high standards and supported to achieve them. The new assessments tell us how we are delivering on this promise to our students.

New Assessments Must Support Teaching, Learning

Created with teachers at the table, Illinois' new assessments are an opportunity to support teaching and learning².

That's because, like the standards themselves, the new assessment system called PARCC, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, reflects what is expected of students at every step from kindergarten through high school, and what knowledge and skills are foundational for student progress³.

Students who piloted PARCC last spring – including nearly 110,000 Illinois kids⁴ – attest to its rigor and relevance. A majority felt the content and complexity of the assessment was consistent with their English schoolwork, though two-thirds said it was more challenging than math class⁵; Mathematics is an area where the U.S. needs to improve, research shows⁶.

Such assessments – that measure authentic learning and reflect the standards we hold for students – play a vital part of the educational process. Here's how:

- **New assessments measure whether students are on track to succeed in college and career.**
Students will be challenged to solve multi-step problems, address real-world issues and explain their reasoning rather than just rote recall – all skills they will need in the world⁷. This is designed not to rank students, but rather to capture what students know and are able to do.
- **New assessments align to span elementary and high school.**
The new state assessment system measures math and English Language Arts in grades three through high school as part of an aligned assessment system. This matters because Illinois for years had a two-tiered assessment system with a deep disconnect between grade school and high school⁸.
- **New assessments support instruction.**
The state is piloting mid-year diagnostic assessments and other tools to provide an early window into teaching and learning as well as the specific supports that students need⁹. By creating an aligned assessment system, with mid- and end-of-year tools, teachers will have ready access to real-time, actionable information about student learning. What's more, districts may choose to replace local, interim assessments that add test time.
- **New assessments replace old state standardized tests.**
Most educators, school leaders and families acknowledge previous state tests did not serve students well¹⁰.

We Must Continue To Assess The Assessments

Most families see the value of assessments in understanding where their child stands and what is needed to get them where they need to go. A majority of Americans believe assessments have a positive impact on public education, according to recent polls¹¹.

Yet Illinois must continue to assess whether the new state assessment system does, in fact, support teaching and learning, and whether it is rolled out with the necessary supports for students and educators. There are questions to be answered and work to be done.

Here are just a few:

- **Will scores on the new tests decline?**

Most likely, yes. Here's why: Like the new standards, the new assessments challenge students to delve more deeply into content, to write often and to defend their reasoning at every turn. This indicates early on whether a child is on track, and enables educators and families to help while there still is time to do so¹².

- **Will the new assessments require more time?**

Yes. The new assessments have high-quality questions that challenge students to think deeply, problem solve and reason¹³. It takes longer for a student to solve a math equation and explain their reasoning than to fill in a bubble. The assessment should measure students' knowledge, not their ability to express knowledge quickly. The shift to a new assessment system is an opportunity for districts to streamline the volume of assessments, but we still must ensure the new system truly supports instruction.

- **Will the new assessment system come with supports for schools?**

Illinois helped create PARCC as an aligned assessment system complete with tools and resources to support instruction. This includes online tools for educators to analyze student results. The midyear diagnostic assessments also will offer an early insight into student performance¹⁴.

- **Will the new assessments be transparent to students, families and educators?**

The Illinois State Board of Education recently made available an audit tool to help school districts compare assessments with an eye toward reducing the volume of tests and bringing transparency to the assessment process¹⁵.

- **Will the new standards and assessments support the needs of diverse learners?**

They must. But to make this work, the assessments must be accessible and appropriate for all students, particularly English language learners and students with special learning needs. The universal design of new assessment helps; this provides adaptive tools and enables students to show what they have learned in different ways¹⁶. Old assessments did not do this well, and we have an opportunity to dramatically improve how we serve diverse learners. We must continually monitor the new assessment system to ensure it delivers.

The Transition Will Take Time, And Support Is Needed

Implementing both the standards and assessments will take time, and there will be bumps along the way. Whether as educators or advocates, as parents or policymakers, we must continue to drive improvement and ensure the new standards and assessments serve the needs of students and educators.

This is an historic opportunity to provide all students with the instruction and support they need to succeed. Now more than ever, all means all.

1 Center on Education and the Workforce, Georgetown University, "Recovery: Job Growth and Education Requirements Through 2020," 2013.

2 Illinois PTA, "Parents' Guide to New Assessments in Illinois," 2013.

3 Illinois State Board of Education, "A New Vision of Assessment: Texts Worth Reading, Problems Worth Solving, Tests Worth Taking," 2014.

4 Illinois State Board of Education, "Why the PARCC Is a Meaningful and Useful Assessment System," 2014.

5 PARCC, "PARCC Field Test: Lessons Learned," 2014.

6 Education Week, "Global Test Shows U.S. Stagnating; Results Spur Policy Debate," 2013.

7 National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards and Student Testing, "On the Road to Assessing Deeper Learning: The Status of Smarter Balanced and PARCC Assessment Consortia," 2013.

8 Consortium on Chicago School Research, "From High School to the Future: The Pathway to 20," 2008.

9 Illinois State Board of Education, "Introduction to Balanced Assessment," 2015.

10 Thomas B. Fordham Institute and the Northwest Evaluation Association, "The Proficiency Illusion: Illinois," 2007.

11 Global Strategy Group, "Nationwide Common Core assessments survey conducted January 9-17, 1000 interviews," 2014.

12 Advance Illinois, Making Assessments Work Video Series, "A New Starting Point for Illinois Public Education," 2014.

13 Illinois State Board of Education, "Top 10 Things Teachers Need to Know About the New Illinois Assessments," 2015.

14 Illinois State Board of Education, "Introduction to Balanced Assessment," 2015.

15 Illinois State Board of Education, "Student Assessment Inventory for School Districts," 2014.

16 PARCC, "PARCC Accessibility Features and Accommodations Manual," 2014.