

# A BIG WIN FOR ARKANSAS STUDENTS



## Common Core State Standards

In 2013, Arkansas's on-time high school graduation rate was 85%—higher than many states. Although this is a promising statistic, there is another story to be told. On the most recent Nation's Report Card, also known as the National Assessment of Educational Progress, less than 40% of students in tested grades demonstrated proficiency in reading and math. It was clear that Arkansas schools were not preparing students with the skills necessary for success. In 2010, 48% of first-year students at Arkansas state universities and community colleges had to enroll in a remedial course because they lacked the skills needed for college-level work. Students were graduating high school, but not with the skills that were most important. That same year, the State Board of Education adopted a set of standards that were higher, clearer, and more focused on the essential skills and knowledge students needed to be successful in college and careers.

Arkansas's previous standards did not adequately prepare students for success after high school. The English language arts standards were among the worst in the nation, and the math standards lacked rigor and did not prioritize the most essential skills, according to a 2010 report by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. In the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's 2007 *Leaders and Laggards* report, Arkansas received a D in academic achievement.

With the adoption of higher standards, Arkansas is one step closer to ensuring that students will have the opportunity to reach their full potential. By 2020, 54% of jobs in the state will require a postsecondary credential. However, only 26% of adults in the state currently have such a credential, resulting in a 28% skills gap. Higher standards are essential to helping close this gap.

Arkansas's Proficiency Rates on the Nation's Report Card

Year	4th Math	4th Reading	8th Math	8th Reading
2011	37%	30%	28%	28%
2013	39%	32%	29%	30%



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## Better Standards Deserve Better Assessments

Teachers across Arkansas have been hard at work putting these academic goals in place. It has been a significant undertaking involving many hours of professional development, curricula alignment, and learning strategies to engage students more deeply than ever before.

The next phase of this work is to implement an improved test that is more meaningful to students, teachers, and parents in determining which skills a student has or has not yet mastered. The state needs a test that can measure the critical thinking and problem solving skills that our students need to succeed—and the existing Augmented Benchmark Exams (ABE) cannot evaluate this level of learning. Improved assessments present an opportunity to move beyond tests that simply measure rote memorization skills to ones that mirror the higher standards and provide teachers with valuable information on how effectively they are teaching and students are learning.

Putting better assessments in place needs to be part of a larger system of accountability that supports student achievement and holds schools accountable for successfully teaching the content outlined in the standards. At the heart of accountability is the need to ensure that all students across Arkansas receive the same high-quality education. Meaningful tests serve as school-wide academic checkups that can identify struggling students and schools in need of extra support and interventions. In addition, improved assessments can identify high-achieving students who require support to maintain their academic engagement and provide them with the resources necessary to continue to excel.

For the past four years, teams of academics, testing experts, and teachers have been working tirelessly to create two testing options aligned to the higher standards: PARCC (Partnership for Assessment of

Readiness for College and Careers) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium. These two tests were field tested in spring 2014 in 35 states including Arkansas, where students took the PARCC field test.

The tests aim to do the following:

- Accurately measure student progress toward college and career readiness.
- Assess a wide range of real-world skills, including critical thinking and writing skills.
- Provide real-time information on student progress to help guide teacher instruction and improve learning.

Arkansas has been a governing member of PARCC since 2010. Students in grades 3–8 will take these tests in math and English language arts this spring, and high school students in Algebra 1 and Geometry will take the end-of-course tests. Districts can choose to give additional assessments in Algebra 2 and/or English 11. The PARCC tests have blueprints and specifications that ensure they are aligned to the more rigorous standards. Results from these improved assessments will inform teachers and parents at an early stage whether students are on track to graduate ready for college and careers, providing actionable information about how to best help students. Since PARCC is a multi-state organization, Arkansas can finally compare their students to their peers in other states to ensure Arkansas students are keeping pace. The PARCC tests also offer a significant savings for Arkansas taxpayers. Since the costs are shared among participating states, the tests cost \$10 less per student than the ABE—an overall savings of \$3 million for the state.

During this transition, it is important to advocate for key criteria that will make the state assessments a strong measuring stick of how Arkansas students are doing on the path to college and careers at the state and national levels. Leaders continue to be enthusiastic about the PARCC tests because they meet so many of the criteria that make up a high-quality aligned test. As advocates, we need to ensure that our state tests accurately measure college and career readiness and

have these characteristics to serve as a useful tool to benefit students.

## A High-Quality Assessment:

- Is developed with input from academic and testing experts, as well as teachers.
- Is field tested and reviewed before full implementation.
- Assesses a wide range of real-world skills using a variety of question formats.
- Provides detailed and timely feedback that acts as an academic checkup.
- Sends an early warning signal to teachers if students are not on track so that interventions can be put in place.
- Is comparable across states.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### 1. What is the difference between standards and curriculum?

- Standards are a set of guidelines for what students are expected to know and be able to do at specific points in their education. Standards provide the foundation for key components of the education system, including curricula, instructional materials, teacher training, and assessments.
- A curriculum is the course of study covering the standards. It is set by local school districts and includes the lesson plans, programs, and textbooks that teachers use to teach the content and skills outlined in the standards, but is not dictated by the standards. There are no specified curricula, textbooks, or instructional materials for the standards. Every district in Arkansas is autonomous in choosing these.

### 2. If students are learning with different curricula, how can they take the same test?

- Although teachers use different materials and curricula, students still learn the same skills outlined in the standards. Teachers can be creative in their instruction, designing lessons to best reach their students and establishing a classroom where all students can achieve.



## The Common Core State Standards:

- Are more rigorous academic standards that prepare all students for success after high school.
- Emphasize real-world skills, such as critical thinking and problem solving.
- Are comparable across states.

## Better Assessments:

- Give us an honest, objective report of how our students are doing.
- Ensure all students are held to the same expectations.
- Identify struggling students so they can get the help they need.
- Identify high-achieving students to provide them with the resources necessary to continue to excel.

## PARCC:

- A group of states working together to develop high-quality, computer-based assessments that measure college and career readiness in both math and English language arts.

### 3. Will the new test replace the old state test?

- Yes. The PARCC tests will replace the ABE in grades 3–8 and previous end-of-course tests in high school.

### 4. Will test scores impact schools and districts?

- School-wide test results are only one of the measures used for school accountability and transparency. Just as we use tests as academic checkups for individual students, they are also used as checkups for our schools. Schools and districts need to be held accountable for teaching the content and skills outlined in the standards. We also need to identify areas of low performance so that interventions can be put in place to ensure students are on track to graduate ready for college and careers.

### 5. How will test scores impact teachers?

- Student growth is one measure used in teacher evaluations. This includes the progress in a student's state assessment score from one year to the next.
- Because 2015 will be the first time the PARCC tests are given, scores will be used as baseline data and will not affect teacher evaluations.

### 6. How will test scores impact students?

- There are currently no testing requirements for graduation or promotion.

### 7. What kind of data will be collected? Will it be released?

- Under the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Arkansas is required to collect data on the performance of schools. Aggregate data collected will include student test scores and information such as attendance, support services, and academic growth. *The state will not release any personally identifiable student information.* Only individuals who interact with students on a daily basis, such as teachers and parents, are allowed to see student-specific information.

- Federal law protects the privacy of student information and education records through the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). The only information that will be publicly available will contain aggregate data for schools, districts, and subgroups.

### 8. How were teachers involved in the test development process?

- More than 30 Arkansas teachers are members of the PARCC Education Leader Cadre, a group of teachers who share best practices, engage in reviewing PARCC state-developed instructional materials, and are active leaders in state and local implementation.
- Arkansas teachers also served in a variety of PARCC working groups, including 42 who served on the item review committee. More than 50 teachers from districts in all areas of the state participated in groups on range finding, form review, test construction review, technology, data management, and other topics.

### 9. Do students need to be computer literate?

- Students need to be computer literate. Paper and pencil versions will be available during the first three years of testing for schools that cannot meet the technology requirement.
- While it may take some time to ensure that every school has the hardware necessary and meets the technology requirements, this is a smart investment. Technology is not going away. Ensuring that all students have equal access to technology is critical to preparing students for a 21st century competitive workforce.

### 10. Where can I go for more information?

- <http://www.arkansased.org/divisions/learning-services/assessment>
- [www.parcconline.org](http://www.parcconline.org)
- [www.BusinessForCore.org](http://www.BusinessForCore.org)