



Smarter Balanced Assessment Frequently Asked Questions

Why does Montana have a new statewide assessment?

In November 2011, the Montana Board of Public Education adopted the Montana Common Core Standards, replacing our previous English language arts and mathematics standards. The new standards are higher and clearer than Montana’s previous standards and are focused on developing critical thinking skills and applying what students are learning to the real world. In order to measure how Montana students are meeting the new standards, Montana has joined with 21 states in developing assessments with the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium.

The Smarter Balanced assessments were “field tested” in spring 2014 and are fully operational in the 2014–15 school year. The Smarter Balanced assessments provide an academic checkup for students by measuring real-world skills like critical thinking and problem solving. In addition, they can provide real-time information during the year to give teachers and parents a better picture of where students are succeeding and where they need help.

What is the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium?

The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (Smarter Balanced) is a multi-state organization working together to develop next-generation assessments that accurately measure student progress toward college and career readiness. The Smarter Balanced assessment is a computer adaptive year-end assessment where each student’s test is customized based on his or her performance throughout the test. The new assessment will be used for state and federal accountability purposes beginning in the 2014-2015 school year.

The Smarter Balanced system:

- Aligns with the Montana Common Core Standards in English language arts and mathematics;
- Focuses on supporting teachers' instructional practice and implementation of new standards;
- Provides a comprehensive reporting system on classroom practices and student progress for teachers, administrators, students and parents;
- Ensures every student is able to show what they know and can do to meet new standards; and
- Offers classroom formative assessment processes and tools as well as computer adaptive interim and summative assessments.

How have Montanans participated in the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium?

Montana is a governing state, which means representatives from our state participate in all Smarter Balanced decisions. More than 200 Montanans have participated in this effort at different levels as

individuals—using their expertise to do everything from assisting in the development of test questions to setting cut scores. Montana educators from K-12 and higher education have participated in workgroups which address topics such as: item development, formative assessment practices leadership and professional learning, math assessment, ELA assessment, accessibility to assessment, and technology. Additionally, 173 schools participated in a pilot of the test in 2013, and all Montana schools participated in the field test in 2014.

When is the testing window for the Smarter Balanced Test?

The Smarter Balanced assessment window will be administered in a 10 to 12 week window at the end of the school year. The 2015 Montana test window is March 25 – May 28. Because many school systems begin and end the year at different times, the test window may be different for each system.

What is a computer adaptive assessment?

Based on student responses, the computer program adjusts the difficulty of questions throughout the assessment. By adapting to the student as the assessment is taking place, these assessments present an individually tailored set of questions to each student and can quickly identify which skills a student has mastered.

Computer adaptive tests are typically shorter than paper-and-pencil assessments because fewer questions are required to accurately determine each student’s achievement level. These tests are also more precise in terms of the results for an individual student’s knowledge and abilities. The assessments draw from a large bank of questions, and since students receive different questions based on their responses, test items are more secure and can be used for a longer period of time.

What is a performance task?

Performance tasks challenge students to apply their knowledge and skills to respond to real-world problems. They can best be described as collections of questions and activities that are connected to a single theme or scenario. These activities are meant to measure depth of understanding, research skills, and complex analysis, which cannot be adequately assessed with selected- or constructed-response items.

Performance tasks in reading, writing, and mathematics will be part of the Smarter Balanced summative, year-end assessment. The performance tasks will be delivered by computer (but will not be computer adaptive) and will take one to two class periods to complete.

Who will score the written responses and the performance tasks?

Some items can be scored automatically; many will be hand-scored by professionally trained readers.

Will calculators be permitted?

The parts of the test that permit calculator use will include an embedded on-screen digital calculator. This tool is only allowed on specific items for which it would be appropriate. It is a good idea for students to practice using the calculators through the Smarter Balanced practice test so they can get used to them.

Will my child have the necessary computer skills to take the online assessment?

Using the practice tests that are online will help schools determine what computer skills students need. In addition, schools have had access to a training test. It has been specifically designed to provide students an opportunity to practice using the various computer skills and expose them to the full array of available supports and/or accommodations.

Students in early grades, who may have less keyboarding experience, will be able to write their answers out on paper first and then type their answers in online.

It is anticipated that some students may see on-screen technologies they may not be familiar with. Most students have had the opportunity to experience the field test in 2014 before the official Smarter Balanced assessment in 2015.

For more information on elementary students writing on computers, go to:
http://opi.mt.gov/pdf/Assessment/SMART/SB_ElementaryWriting.pdf.

As a parent, how will the results from Smarter Balanced test differ from the CRT test?

The annual state assessment shows us generally how close Montana students are to meeting the grade-level goals set by the state for English, science and mathematics.

This school year, the online Smarter Balanced assessments will replace our previous paper-and-pencil CRT Reading and Math assessments. The new assessments offer significant improvements over tests of the past. They include writing at every grade level, more interactive questions, and performance tasks that ask students to demonstrate a range of critical thinking and problem solving skills. We believe this assessment will be a better tool for parents and teachers, providing a much clearer picture of where students are and what we need to do to move them forward.

This first year of the Smarter Balanced test will be a new starting point for student achievement in Montana. Because the new assessments measure higher standards, the definition of grade-level performance is also higher than it was with our old tests. Your student's progress towards meeting grade-level standards will continue to be described as: Novice, Nearing Proficiency, Proficient, and Advanced. For the first few years, fewer students are likely to meet grade-level standards. It's important to note that this does not mean that students are doing worse than previous years. Our students are being assessed by more challenging academic standards than before, and it may take some time for students to catch up.

How long will students have to take the test?

The tests are not timed, but it is estimated that the English assessment will take 3.5 (for elementary students) to 4 hours (for high school students) and the math assessment will take 2.5 hours (for elementary students) to 3.5 hours (for high school students). In addition, students will have a brief classroom activity to introduce the topic of the performance task. Testing will occur in multiple sessions, so students will typically spend 1 to 2 hours per day on the assessments over several days.

Who will take the alternate test?

In 2015, students who qualify for the alternate will participate in a new alternate aligned to the Common Core State Standards and developed by the National Center and State Collaborative (NCSC), of which Montana is a member.

Students must have an IEP and meet eligibility guidelines that are provided to IEP teams by OPI. The testing window for the Alternate test is March 30-May 15, 2015.

Will accommodations be available for students with IEP's participating in the field test?

The IEP team will identify the accommodations and supports for a student. A school system or school administrator will upload the required accommodations into the Smarter Balanced system. In most cases, the accommodations will be embedded in the online system. Smarter has developed a manual of guidelines, "[Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium: Usability, Accessibility, and Accommodations Guidelines](#)," for use by test administrators and IEP teams.

Are there any changes to the science assessment?

The Smarter Balanced assessment does not have a science component. Montana students will continue to take the paper-and-pencil Science CRT and Science CRT Alternate in grades 4, 8, and 10.

The testing window for the Science CRT is March 3-24, 2015. Schools received the science testing materials in February. Schools will follow the same test security and administration procedures as in past years.

When will schools and parents receive results from the Smarter Balanced test?

This year will be the first year of developing reports for schools and parents, and the testing window ends on May 28. The OPI will receive initial results in June with results to schools to follow during the summer. Student reports for parents will be ready after school starts in the fall. This is similar to the schedule followed for the CRT Assessments.

How much does the Smarter Balanced Assessment cost?

Smarter Balanced has released cost estimates for its assessments that include expenses for ongoing research and development of the assessment system, as well as test administration and scoring. The full suite of summative, interim, and formative assessments is estimated to cost \$29 per student.

These costs are less than the amount that two-thirds of the Consortium's member states currently pay, including Montana. Montana's previous statewide assessment cost approximately \$32 per student.

For additional information regarding the Smarter Balanced Assessment:

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Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium:

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