The Common Core and the Future of Student Assessment in Ohio

by Kathleen Porter-Magee

with
Jamie Davies O'Leary
& Emmy Partin

Foreword

The Thomas B. Fordham Institute has long advocated high-quality standards nationally and in Ohio, a state that's been a leader in the accountability realm for nearly two decades. Ohio required statewide proficiency tests starting in the 1990s, and academic standards and accountability systems aligned to them beginning in the early 2000s. The Buckeye State was also a leader in implementing value-added measures of student progress and in utilizing and publicizing assessment data. A decade later, however, many states—including Ohio—have recognized that their academic standards are not as rigorous as they need to be if all young people are to be college ready when they leave high school. Weak academic standards ill-serve our young people and do not successfully prepare them for the jobs, opportunities, and civic responsibilities of the future.

Recognizing this problem, Ohio has joined 45 other states and the District of Columbia in adopting Common Core State Standards in English language arts and mathematics. These academic standards were developed by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, and adopted by the Ohio State Board of Education in June 2010. They are far superior to Ohio's present standards.

This is a promising start, but the hard work is just beginning. Most immediately, Ohio is at a crossroads where it must decide which of two consortia of states to join for purposes of assessing the new standards. (Ohio is presently a member of both but a decision-maker in neither.) The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) and the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Career (PARCC) are both voluntary coalitions of states banded together for the creation of common assessments tied to the Common Core standards.

States are also free to develop their own assessments, though that is costly, challenging, and time consuming. (Each consortium is spending nearly $200 million simply to develop these new tests.) Participating in a consortium has another advantage, for even if Ohio were able to muster the money and capacity to develop its own rigorous, content-aligned assessments, it would not be able to compare Ohio students and schools with those in other states and the nation as a whole.[1] Ohio is likely to get better, more cost-effective assessments, and will be able to compare its results across states, by sticking with—and taking a lead role in— one of the two consortia. But it needs to make up its mind as to which—and the sooner the better.

If Ohio commits to a consortium now, it will give the state an important head start in the enormous amount of work involved with rolling out new academic standards and everything associated with them. This includes creating a revamped statewide accountability system that is aligned with the new content standards; training teachers, principals, and district leaders to understand those standards, new curriculum, and testing protocols; and ensuring that professional development and teacher preparation programs are also suitably aligned. Taken as a whole, this amounts to an entire system reboot—a major undertaking, but worth the effort if it leads to higher performing students in the Buckeye State in coming years.

Choosing a consortium at this stage gives Ohio the opportunity to influence the assessment development but it does not bind the state to ultimately using it. We have no idea at this stage

[1] The exception is the National Assessment of Educational Progress. However, NAEP isn't linked to Common Core standards, so is lacking in terms of the comparisons it enables Ohio to make.

how good either consortium's products will be or how much they will cost to fully implement across a state. That's why it's important to retain the right to opt out. Today, however, Ohio should pick a consortium and engage in it as a full partner, as many other states have already done. To repeat, transitioning to new standards and assessments is a serious undertaking for the state, its schools, and its educators.

Many states are already modifying their existing assessments (and curriculum, professional development, and statewide accountability systems) to be aligned with the Common Core, and in anticipation of the new assessment systems being developed. Ohio would be well advised to do likewise.

Chester E. Finn, Jr.
President

Terry Ryan
Vice President for Ohio Programs & Policies

Introduction

With the adoption of Common Core standards by the Ohio State Board of Education in June 2010, the Buckeye State set a significant series of changes in motion that will eventually touch every classroom in the state. Whether these changes improve outcomes for students in the Buckeye State, however, will depend in large part on the choices made in coming months.

In 2002, No Child Left Behind compelled every state and the District of Columbia to develop and adopt standards for English language arts (ELA), math, and science. (Nearly every state has also set standards in other content areas, including social studies, foreign language, technology, and the arts.) However, the quality, clarity, and rigor of individual states' standards varied greatly. In a 2010 analysis of state academic standards, Fordham's expert reviewers found that barely a dozen states earned honors marks for their ELA and math standards, while 21 states earned failing grades for their ELA standards and 15 for their math. (Ohio's ELA and math standards both earned a mediocre C. See Fordham's Standard's Central[2] for our reviews of all state standards and the Common Core.) What's more, states set radically discrepant "passing scores" on their assessments such that, for example, a student deemed proficient in Michigan might fall well short of the proficiency target in Massachusetts or California.[3]

In 2009 the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers joined with 45 states and the District of Columbia to draft "common" standards for ELA and math. The final versions of these standards were released in June 2010. Through the Race to the Top program, the federal government has funded two groups of states ("consortia") to develop such assessments for state use: 1) the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) and 2) the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). Both are working to develop new assessment systems aligned with the Common Core State Standards.

What does this mean for Ohio?

Ohio currently has a foot in both assessment consortia, but the State Board of Education needs to decide no later than the beginning of the 2014-15 school year whether the state will commit exclusively to one of the consortia as a governing state, or to neither.

No state is required to commit to a consortium assessment, much less use it. Ohio could opt to "go it alone" and develop CCSS-aligned assessments independently. However, given that the Common Core standards are substantively different from Ohio's previous standards, the state's existing assessment system must either be completely overhauled or scrapped and replaced.

Today, as a "participating" state in the two consortia, Ohio does not have a voice at the table as major decisions are being made about assessment design, cost, field testing plans, etc. If Ohio wants to influence those decisions, it needs to become a "governing" state—which can only happen after it selects one of the consortia.

What's more, if Ohio is committed to ensuring that the Common Core standards gain traction in the state's thousands of classrooms—and that teachers, students, and parents are prepared for the assessments that will drive accountability in the state beginning in 2014-15—Ohio should begin implementing the standards right away. That involves a multi-faceted and challenging "transition" during these next several years. That transition ought to include altering the state's existing assessment blueprints to better reflect the priorities outlined in the CCSS, as other states are doing, as well as working with schools and districts to align school- and district-level formative, interim, and unit assessments to the level of rigor and type of tests and test items that students will see on the end-of-year assessments beginning in 2014-15. Because there are differences in the structure, format, and types of items that will be used on each

Brief History of Standards and Assessments in Ohio

Ohio put in place statewide proficiency tests in the early 1990s, but these exams were not linked to any academic standards. The state first passed legislation in July 2001 that required standards for all grades, K-12, in math, ELA, science, social studies, fine arts, foreign language, and technology. That legislation also required the development of an assessment system and graduation test, which the state began rolling out in 2003.

In 2009, the legislature passed a requirement for the state to replace its current high school graduation test and move to end- of-course exams in science, math, ELA, and social studies.

Ohio's standards have been updated through the years, and in June 2010 the State Board of Education voted to replace them with the Common Core standards in math and ELA. Later that year, state officials decided to join both the new consortia of states developing assessments to be aligned with the Common Core standards.

assessment, the sooner the state decides which assessment it will administer, the sooner this work can begin.

Note, too, that participating states are expected to take part in field testing the new assessment system. PARCC will begin piloting its assessment items in the current school year (2011-12) and both consortia plan to fully test their new assessments in 2013-14. Given the investment of time required to fully field test a single assessment system, it would be impractical for Ohio to field test multiple assessments.

The Assessment Consortia:
The Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) & SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC)

Table 1. Key Information about PARCC & SBAC

	PARCC	*SBAC*
Overview		
Managed by	Achieve, Inc.: an independent, bipartisan, non-profit education reform organization created in 1996 by governors and corporate leaders	The State of Washington's Department of Education
Governing states (as of 8. 2011)	Arizona, Arkansas, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, and Tennessee	California, Connecticut, Hawaii, Idaho, Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Michigan, Missouri, Montana, Nevada, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Oregon, Vermont, Utah, Washington, and West Virginia
Participating states	Alabama, Colorado, Delaware, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Dakota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina	Alabama, Colorado, Delaware, Kentucky, North Dakota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, South Dakota, Wisconsin, and Wyoming
Race to the Top funding amount	$186 million	$176 million
Assessment Design		
Technology	Both consortia are designing computer-administered assessments, not pencil-and-paper tests such as Ohio currently uses. Likewise, both are planning to create "device-neutral" assessments, meaning that schools may use a variety of platforms for assessment administration, including laptops, desktop computers, tablet PCs, etc.	
	• Computer-administered, though not computer-adaptive • State must have technological infrastructure in place by 2014-15. • Will offer paper-and-pencil alternative only for students who need special accommodations.	• Computer-administered and computer-adaptive, meaning the test will automatically adapt to the student's ability level based on the answers given. A familiar example of a computer-adaptive test is the GRE (Graduate Record Exam), required for admission to most graduate programs. • Summative assessments will eventually be fully online, but for 2014-15, 2015-16, and 2016-17, states will be able to use paper-and-pencil exams.

	PARCC	*SBAC*

Assessment Design

Required assessments

Both consortia will require end-of-year assessments for ELA and mathematics for all grades, 3-8. PARCC also requires end-of-year or end-of-course assessments for grades 9-11. SBAC requires an end-of-year assessment only for grade 11.

PARCC	*SBAC*
Performance-Based Assessment: In grades 3-8 and high school, schools will be required to administer extended, multi-session performance-based assessments as close to the end of the year as possible. In ELA/literacy, these performance-based assessments will include tasks focused on writing effectively when analyzing text. In mathematics, they will include tasks focused on applying the content and skills learned throughout the year.	**Summative, End-of-Year Assessment, Grades 3-8 and 11:** SBAC requires only a summative, end-of-year assessment, which includes:
These assessments will be scored centrally and the results will be ready in time to inform the end-of-year summative assessment score for each student.	• **Performance Tasks:** Students will complete one task in reading, one in writing, and two in mathematics. A combination of machine and teacher scoring will be used to evaluate the assessments, and results will be available as soon as possible after assessment administration.
Grades 3-8 End-of-Year Assessment: These tests will be administered for ELA/literacy and mathematics. This assessment will be computer-based (though not computer-adaptive) and will be machine-scorable.	• **Computer-Adaptive Assessments:** The computer adaptive component will consist of approximately 40–65 questions per content area presented within a computer-adaptive assessment. It will include selected-response, constructed-response, and technology-enhanced items. A portion of the computer-adaptive section of the assessment will be scored by computer and a portion will be scored by teachers. The consortium also plans to make available a "retake option," which would allow students who are approved to do so to take the assessment a second time, but see a new set of items. The student's highest score would be used to determine annual achievement and annual growth relative to staying on track to college and career readiness.
Grades 9-11 End-of-Year ELA Assessment: At the high school level, end-of-year assessments will be required for grades 9-11.	
High School, End of Course Mathematics Assessments: Summative, computer-based, machine-scorable end-of-course assessments will be developed for high school mathematics.	
Grades 3-11, Assessment of Listening and Speaking (ELA/Literacy Only): The CCSS ELA standards delineate expectations for listening and speaking. In order to assess the full range of the CCSS standards, PARCC will be developing a required listening and speaking assessment.*	

* While the consortium is still finalizing its design plans for this assessment, PARCC has indicated that these assessments will be teacher-scored using a common rubric and that the results will not be included in a student's summative assessment score. Nor will the results be required to be used as part of the state's accountability system.

	PARCC	**SBAC**

Assessment Design *(cont'd.)*

| *Optional assessments* | **Early Assessments:** These are diagnostic reading, math, and writing assessments that are designed to be administered early in the academic year. These tests are designed for multiple purposes, including: to help educators pinpoint knowledge and skills gaps of students who performed poorly on previous grades' summative assessments; and to identify students who may benefit from enrichment.

(Note that the consortium has not yet decided whether the early assessments will be diagnostic tests that are aligned primarily to grade-level standards, whether they will assess student mastery of the highest-priority standards from the previous year, or some combination of the two. The governing states will make this determination, with input from all PARCC states, as the consortium finalizes its assessment design plans.)

Mid-Year Assessment: These are performance-based assessments that will serve two purposes. First, they provide teachers and students early exposure to the kinds of performance tasks they will encounter in the required end-of-year performance-based assessments. Second, they will serve as formative assessments that will provide teachers with instructionally useful information about student mastery of essential skills. The consortium will not require these tests, nor will results from these tests inform a student's summative assessment score. Some states may choose to require the mid-year assessment and may include the results from the assessment in a student's summative score.

Optional Formative Performance Tasks for Grades K–2: While the consortium will focus primarily on building assessments and tools for use in grades 3-12, they will also create formative assessment tasks for teachers in grades K-2 to monitor student progress towards mastery of essential K-2 content and skills. Note, however, that these assessments will not necessarily be valid for teacher and school leader evaluations. | **Grades 9-10, Summative End-of-Year Assessments:** While not required, SBAC plans to create a summative end-of-year assessment, which will include both performance tasks and a computer-adaptive assessment, for grades 9 and 10.

Interim Assessments: These computer-adaptive assessments are designed to guide instruction by measuring student progress towards mastery of the standards and by identifying learning gaps. These assessments will be based on learning progressions (see sidebar), which means that, in order to help students prepare, teachers will need to ensure that their curricula are aligned to the scope and sequence of the content being assessed. |

	PARCC	**SBAC**

Assessment Design *(cont'd.)*

Student achievement data & accountability

Definition of proficiency: In both consortia, states must commit to common achievement levels, including definitions of proficiency. Ohio will no longer set its own cut scores, thus allowing for meaningful comparisons across states.

End-of-year score: A student's summative assessment score will be based on his/her performance on the end-of-year assessment and the performance-based tasks.

Other purposes: Both consortia have committed to ensuring that assessment results will be valid for the purpose of teacher and school leader evaluations.

PARCC	**SBAC**
Determining the full spectrum of performance: The PARCC assessments will include nearly twice as many score points as most existing state assessments. That means that data from tests will be able to communicate more precise information about the proficiency level of both high-performing and struggling students.	**Determining the full spectrum of performance:** The SBAC summative assessment will include a computer-adaptive portion that is designed to target test questions at each students' ability level.

Cost

Cost to administer

The annual administration cost of the assessments is a major consideration for policymakers deciding between the two. After all, Ohio currently spends nearly $70 million per year administering more than two million state tests. Unfortunately, the actual costs of the PARCC and SBAC assessments are impossible to confirm at this point as both systems are still under development.

As of this writing, PARCC was committed to keeping the administration cost of its required assessments below $14 per test (the average amount its participating states spend on tests now), but this figure is not final and does not include the cost of optional assessments. SBAC currently indicates its required summative assessments will cost $20 per test and its optional, formative ones will cost $7.50. Again, these figures are not final.

Further, neither of these estimates takes into consideration the cost of ramping up technology and Internet access to administer online tests or the additional staff time required to administer interim or performance-based assessments.

Tools Available to Teachers

- Both consortia will have content frameworks that can help inform curricula.

- Both will have interactive data tools that will allow educators to view student data, generate custom reports, etc.

- Both will have online practice tests.

SBAC will have formative assessment tools – teacher-created tools designed to be used in the classroom on a frequent basis.

	PARCC	SBAC
Other Considerations for Ohio		
Additional distinguishing attributes	**End-of-course exams:** PARCC is developing end-of-course high school exams, and Ohio law requires the state to implement high school end-of-course exams. Any state that is a governing state in the PARCC consortium in 2014-15 must: 1. Use the results from the assessment system in their state accountability systems, including for determinations of school effectiveness. 2. Provide staff to support the Partnership's activities. PARCC's mid-year assessments will be administered and scored by teachers. While PARCC is planning to provide teachers with an online score-training tool to help them score the assessments and use the data to drive instruction, Ohio will have to commit to ensuring that the results of the mid-year assessments are consistent from teacher to teacher and school to school and to ensuring that the results from these assessments correlate with the results from the summative, end-of-year performance tasks.	**End-of-course exams:** It is unclear if the 9-10 summative assessments to be developed by SBAC will be end-of-course and meet this Buckeye State requirement.
Other Considerations for Ohio *(cont'd.)*		
Timeline	**2011:** Content frameworks released **2011-2014:** Piloting and field testing of assessment items **2012:** PARCC begins to release sample assessment items **2014-15:** Technology in place to administer PARCC assessments in place in all schools **2014-15:** PARCC assessment administration begins	**2011-2012:** Sample assessment items released **2012-2013:** Interim and formative assessment resources available for teacher use **2014-2015:** SBAC assessment administration begins **2017-2018:** All states required to have technology infrastructure to administer assessments online

Additional considerations

Whichever consortium Ohio chooses, major changes to current state practice will come with it, and many of these changes and implementation considerations are shared between the two consortia.

1. Technology requirements for online assessment administration

Both consortia are developing online assessments, not pencil-and-paper tests such as Ohio currently uses. One major benefit of online exams is that state and local educators will see assessment results much sooner – currently Ohioans must wait nearly four months after the administration of state exams to see the final results.

But online tests come with additional costs and obligations. In order to help states administer the assessments in this manner, both consortia are planning to create "device-neutral" assessments, meaning that schools may use a variety of platforms for assessment administration, including laptops, desktop computers, tablet PCs, etc. In addition, both consortia are offering multiple forms of each assessment and broad assessment windows so that schools may stagger assessment administration within each grade and subject. This should help lessen the demand for new technology. Both consortia are also coordinating on the development of a technology readiness tool that will help schools determine their technology needs and to help them plan ahead for assessment administration.

But ultimately the cost and effort required to provide ample computers or other devices, as well as sufficient Internet access and the technical know-how to administer the tests, will fall to the states. This is a tremendous unknown cost (both in dollars and time) for each consortium.

2.   Curricular constraints on schools (including schools of choice)

PARCC

Because the PARCC assessment includes end-of-course tests for high school mathematics, if Ohio opts to administer the PARCC assessment, every school—including schools of choice—will need to elect to administer assessments aligned to either a traditional high school mathematics sequence or an "integrated" math sequence. Since the CCSS math standards are not grouped according to course or grade level, this will put some limited curricular constraints on all schools.

SBAC

The SBAC assessment design only requires governing and participating states to administer the summative, end-of-year assessment. That said, while it does not explicitly require states to use its interim and formative assessment tools, the consortium strongly recommends them. Because the interim assessments are aligned to learning progressions that resemble curricular sequences, teachers in schools that use them will be forced to align their curriculum and instruction to the scope and sequence of the learning progressions. By contrast, PARCC's mid-year assessment does not require strict adherence to a particular sequence of content.

3.   More rigorous expectations

Now that a majority of states have adopted the Common Core State Standards and are beginning to think seriously about implementing issues, education leaders, teachers, and parents are expressing concern about what will happen to student achievement results. Given the gap between the quality of standards that were in place in many states and the (improved) quality of the CCSS, this is a valid concern.

According to Fordham's analysis of state standards, the Ohio academic standards for ELA and mathematics both earned a C, whereas the Common Core State Standards for ELA and math earned a B+ and A-, respectively. That is to say that, based on our evaluation, the Common Core State Standards are more rigorous than those that were in place prior to their adoption.

What's more, according to our 2007 Proficiency Illusion report, the Ohio state assessments were among the easiest in the nation. In fact, our reviewers found that only five states had lower reading and math cut scores than Ohio for the third-grade assessment, and only three states for the eighth-grade assessment. Both consortia require members to use common "cut score" metrics. That means that, assuming that the PARCC and SBAC assessments are aligned to the median proficiency target of all of the states we studied, the test will be significantly more rigorous than the current assessments being used by the Buckeye State today.

Regardless of what assessment consortium Ohio opts to join, the state should begin the move today so that educators, parents, taxpayers, and elected officials are not shocked by a significant drop in assessment results in 2014. To that end, Ohio should consider:

• Raising the present proficiency cut score on both the K-8 assessments and the Ohio high school graduation test.

• Aligning the assessment blueprint for the existing state tests to the top priorities outlined by the CCSS. (While both consortia are committing to assessing all standards, both are starting to release materials within the next year that will help define the "top priority" standards for both ELA and math at each grade level.)

While these measures will not solve all implementation challenges, they will smooth implementation and help prepare educators for what is to come when the assessment changes in 2014-15.

Acknowledgments

The Thomas B. Fordham Institute is a nonprofit organization that conducts research, issues publications, and directs action projects in elementary and secondary education reform at the national level and in Ohio, with special emphasis on our hometown of Dayton. It is affiliated with the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, and this publication is a joint project of the Foundation and the Institute. For further information, please visit our website at www.edexcellence.net or write to the Institute at 1016 16th Street, NW, 8th Floor, Washington, D.C. 20036. The report is available on the Institute's website. The Institute is neither connected with nor sponsored by Fordham University.

FORDHAM