Smarter Balanced State Tests: Frequently Asked Questions

Teaching & Learning Department
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Smarter Balanced State Tests

What is the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium?
The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) is a team of states—including Oregon—working together voluntarily to develop K-12 assessments in English language arts/literacy and math called Smarter Balanced. These tests are aligned to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and accurately measure student progress toward college and career readiness. The Consortium includes educators, researchers, policymakers, and community groups working to help all students thrive in a knowledge-driven global economy. Smarter Balanced member states educate more than 19 million students nationally.

How are teachers involved in creating the Smarter Balanced assessment system?
Smarter Balanced is committed to engaging teachers in the design of an assessment system that provides resources and information to improve teaching and learning. Teachers helped write and review assessment items and performance tasks for the Pilot Test of the assessment system in early 2013 and contributed to the development of items for the Field Test in early 2014. In addition, teams of teachers from each state have been and are helping evaluate various assessment tools and resources for the new Smarter Balanced assessment system. Over 250 educators in Oregon have participated in the development process—developing test questions, creating teaching resources, and helping set achievement levels for the new tests.

What are the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and how are they related to Smarter Balanced?
Developed by 48 states, two territories, and the District of Columbia, the Common Core State Standards offer schools, teachers, students, and parents clear, understandable, and consistent standards in English language arts and mathematics. The CCSS defines the knowledge and skills students should take away from their K-12 schooling to be successfully prepared for college and career opportunities. More than 40 states have adopted the Common Core State Standards. Oregon adopted the standards in 2010, and local schools and districts have been working hard to implement the standards in their classrooms.

Teachers and parents need information about whether students are meeting the expectations set by the CCSS. The Smarter Balanced assessment system measures mastery of the Common Core State Standards and will provide timely information about student achievement and progress toward college and career readiness. Educators will also have access to resources and tools that they can use in the classroom to address the individual needs of their students as we make this transition.

Does the Common Core State Standards require more standardized tests?
No. This change doesn’t mean students will take more state tests, but it does mean the tests will be different.

Oregon has adopted the Common Core State Standards, replacing our previous state standards in math and language arts. Since the state’s learning standards in math and language arts have changed, the statewide assessment of students’ learning in these areas also has changed.
Students will take the new state test for math and the new state test for English language arts (instead of separate assessments of reading and writing) no more than once in a given year. Previously many students took the state test multiple times.

**Does a shared assessment system require a shared or common curriculum?**
No. Curriculum decisions are made by educators at the local level. Our Oregon schools and districts make local decisions about what our students are taught in the classroom. As a participating member of SBAC, Oregon will have access to professional development materials and instructional resources for teachers. These tools are optional and can be used, as needed, to complement local curriculum supports to districts and teachers.

**How will Smarter Balanced assessments contribute to student success?**
All students deserve an education that prepares them for their next steps in life—whether that’s going on to college or starting a career. Smarter Balanced is guided by the belief that a balanced, high-quality assessment system can improve teaching and learning by providing information and tools for teachers and schools to help students succeed. Timely and meaningful assessment data can offer specific information about areas of performance so that teachers can follow up with targeted instruction, students can better focus their own efforts, and administrators and policymakers can more fully understand what students know and can do, in order to guide curriculum and professional development decisions. Importantly, educators will be able to easily compare student achievement between schools, districts, and states to ensure that students are making progress.

**How does Smarter Balanced compare to our previous Oregon statewide tests?**
Similar to our previous state tests, Smarter Balanced assessments make use of computer adaptive technology, which is more precise and efficient in delivering accurate and timely information on student progress. Computer adaptive tests adjust to a student’s ability by basing the difficulty of future questions on previous answers, providing a more accurate measurement of student achievement, particularly for high and low-performing students. Unlike our previous state tests, Smarter Balanced assessments go beyond multiple-choice questions and include different types of questions that allow students to construct their own answers and better demonstrate their communication, analytical, and real-world problem solving skills.

Performance tasks in reading, writing, and math challenge students to apply their knowledge and skills to respond to real-world problems. Performance tasks measure capacities such as depth of understanding, research skills, and complex analysis, which cannot be adequately assessed with more traditional multiple choice questions.

You can find more information about the Smarter Balanced assessments at [www.ode.state.or.us/go/smarterbalanced](http://www.ode.state.or.us/go/smarterbalanced) or [https://www.beaverton.k12.or.us/PS/Pages/Assessment.aspx](https://www.beaverton.k12.or.us/PS/Pages/Assessment.aspx)

**Do the Smarter Balanced assessments support English language learners, students with disabilities, and other students with special needs?**
The Smarter Balanced assessment system will provide accurate measures of achievement and growth for students with disabilities and English language learners. The tests will address visual, auditory, and physical access barriers—allowing virtually all students to demonstrate what they know and can do. Additionally, the tests include multiple tools (e.g., digital notepad), supports (e.g., translated pop-up glossary), and accommodations (e.g., Braille, closed captioning) to adapt to every student’s distinct needs and learning styles.
Opting Out of State Tests

What state tests are required for Oregon students?
Academic assessments serve as the primary means through which Oregon and its local schools and districts measure and report student achievement and growth. Oregon law requires that public schools/districts must provide instruction and assessment aligned to the State Board of Education adopted academic content standards as well as implement the statewide assessment system in English language arts, math, and science.

Do Beaverton School District students take other nationwide standardized tests?
It depends on a student’s grade level and course selection. Students may take other tests such as the following:

- Other college readiness assessments like the ACT, PLAN, and EXPLORE.
- High school students who do not meet the graduation requirement of demonstrating proficiency in reading, writing and math by meeting standards on the statewide assessment may take an alternative assessment.
- High school students enrolled in Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses typically take final, nationwide standardized tests in the applicable AP or IB subject.
- Some high school students complete ACT WorkKeys, an assessment system that measures real-world job skills. Students who successfully complete certain WorkKeys assessments can earn the National Career Readiness Certificate.
- Assessments used to identify students for eligibility for Talented and Gifted (TAG) services.

Can I opt my student out of the Common Core State Standards?
No. A parent cannot opt out their student from instruction based on the Common Core State Standards in an Oregon public school because these instructional standards form the framework of math and language arts instruction in public schools statewide. State standards are adopted by the State Board of Education and are mandatory for all public schools and charter schools in Oregon. A parent objecting to these learning standards may consider alternative options, such as homeschooling or enrolling in a private tuition-based school that does not align instruction to the state standards.

Can I opt my student out of state tests?
Disabilities and religious beliefs are the only bases on which an Oregon school district may approve an exemption. You may request an exemption from state testing to accommodate your student’s IDEA or Section 504 identified disability or sincerely held religious beliefs.

Schools are required by law to administer statewide assessments to assess students’ learning, in accordance with the procedures and schedule defined by the Oregon Department of Education. Oregon school districts are permitted to excuse a student from a state required program, such as state testing, to accommodate the student’s disabilities or religious beliefs.

Are there ways for me to share my comments/concerns about state tests other than opting out?
Public schools are required by state and federal law to assess students’ learning. To share your comments or concerns about testing requirements with decision-makers, you can write a letter to or speak with:

- Oregon’s Superintendent of Public Instruction (Oregon’s governor), oregon.gov/gov
- Oregon’s Deputy Superintendent of Public Instruction, www.ode.state.or.us
- Oregon Department of Education or State Board of Education, www.ode.state.or.us
- Oregon’s Education Investment Board or Oregon’s Chief State School Officer, education.oregon.gov
If you have a question or comment specifically about how state tests are administered in the Beaverton School District, talk to your school’s test coordinator or the District’s test coordinator, Rayna Flye (Rayna_flye-fairman@beaverton.k12.or.us), (503) 591-4403.

Will a student be sanctioned for not taking state tests?
Students for whom there is an approved exemption will be excused. Students who miss school during state testing, but do not have an approved exemption and whose absence is not otherwise excused as provided by district policy, will have an unexcused absence reflected on their student record.

High school students who do not participate in the state testing (with or without an approved exemption) will need to participate in an alternative assessment to demonstrate proficiency in Essential Skills requirements in reading, writing and math to graduate with an Oregon Diploma.

What are the consequences if I opt my student out of state tests?
- **Information:** Valuable information about your student’s K–12 learning progress will be lost. Assessment is an important part of teaching and learning. State tests provide parents and educators with meaningful diagnostic information about a student’s progress in mastering certain content and skills. The redesigned state tests in math and language arts (beginning in 2015) are expected to provide even more useful information. A significant consequence of not taking these tests is the loss of valuable information about your student’s progress, and the lost opportunity to shape future instruction accordingly.

- **Preparation:** Statewide assessments provide key information about whether your student is on track for graduation, and where he or she may need more help. Additionally, your student may be disadvantaged if his or her first exposure to standardized tests is in high school.

- **Graduation:** In order to graduate from high school in Oregon, your student must meet standards on the statewide assessment or an alternative assessment. Oregon’s graduation requirements include demonstrating proficiency in the essential skills of reading, writing and math. Most students do this by meeting standards on the state test. If they do not take or do not pass the state test, they must demonstrate proficiency either by meeting standards on another approved standardized test, or through work samples, which likely would require taking an additional class in place of another chosen course or elective.

- **College placement:** Some colleges and universities, including all public colleges and universities in Oregon, now use students’ performance on the Smarter Balanced assessment to determine whether a student is ready to take credit-bearing college courses or must take remedial classes that cost the same as college courses but do not count toward a college degree. Students who go to a college using Smarter Balanced scores for placement purposes may be required to take additional college placement tests if they have not completed the Smarter Balanced assessment.

- **School rating:** If too few students are assessed, your school’s rating on the state school report card will be negatively impacted. A school’s rating can influence how a school is perceived and how well it attracts and retains student enrollment and neighborhood residents. Under Oregon’s school accountability system, schools and districts that have state testing participation rates below the minimum requirement, 94.5% of all students and 94.5% of each subgroup of students, will have their overall school rating lowered by one level (out of five) per each consecutive year participation rates are not met in Language Arts and Mathematics.

Will my child’s teacher or principal be penalized if I opt out my student?
How do I request a testing exemption to accommodate my student’s religious beliefs? 
Students who have sincerely held religious convictions against standardized testing may consider asking their parents to request a religious exemption from state tests. A religious exemption must be founded on a sincerely held religious belief, as opposed to a personal, political, or sociological belief without a religious basis. If approved, the student who receives a religious exemption will be excused from the test.

To apply for a religious exemption:
- Write a letter to the school principal affirming that your objection to the test is based on a sincerely held religious belief. Propose an alternative learning activity which meets the goals of the test.
- The principal will evaluate your request and determine whether it is approved or not approved.

Please note that given the priority of test administration, the school will have limited staff available to supervise and facilitate alternate learning activities for students not participating in testing.

How do I request a testing exemption to accommodate my student’s disability? 
Parents of students who have an IDEA or Section 504 identified disability that interferes with their ability to participate in standardized testing, even with accommodations made for their disability, may consider requesting a disability exemption from state tests. A letter is not required if the exemption is currently documented in a student’s IEP.

- Write a letter to the school principal explaining how your student’s disability interferes with his or her ability to participate in state tests and why you believe there are no accommodations that would allow your student to participate.
- The principal will evaluate your request and determine whether it is approved or not approved.

Please note that given the priority of test administration, the school will have limited staff available to supervise and facilitate alternate learning activities for students not participating in testing.

Credits: Oregon Department of Education, Eugene School District 4J