

Connecticut Assessment FAQ

What Kind of Tests Are In Schools, and Why?

The purpose of tests (also called assessments) in the education system is to collect information that helps to track and improve learning. Tests help us monitor the development of our students' skills and knowledge, find any gaps in their learning, and address them.

Some tests are very formal and require strict controls regarding timing and other testing conditions. For instance, Connecticut's standardized assessment is a formal test that is administered annually to all public school students in grades 3-8, and once again in high school. In contrast, other kinds of testing, such as spelling tests or quizzes, are administered at the school or district level.

In addition, many schools regularly use informal testing to monitor student learning. These tests are administered in such a manner that students may not even recognize their skills and knowledge are being "tested." For example, teachers may develop activities to see if students have mastered a particular math concept, or they may assess reading comprehension through classroom discussions.

Why Do We Need Standardized Tests?

Standardized tests are scientifically developed tests that are statistically proven to measure: (a) the same results on multiple occasions; and (b) the information that the test seeks to measure.

Standardized testing is a federal necessity under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (sometimes referred to as "ESEA," "No Child Left Behind," or "NCLB"). In 2001, ESEA was updated to require that states annually assess every child in grades 3-8 and once in high school--in exchange for federal education funding. For nearly a decade before that time, Connecticut had been a leader among states--requiring testing in grades 3, 6, 8 and 10. After 2001, Connecticut was also required to add testing in grades 4, 5, and 7.

With this change, it became possible, for the first time, for schools, districts, and states to identify gaps in achievement among various groups of children (e.g. Black, Hispanic, economically disadvantaged, and special education) throughout their education experience. This valuable information has increased efforts to understand how we are meeting the needs of these traditionally underserved students and has resulted in improved learning opportunities for all children. If we were to eliminate standardized tests, we would be deprived of a statistically accurate measure that--along with other indicators of achievement--can be used to reliably monitor how all students are progressing. Every district has some students who are not doing as well as they should be; we need to be able to identify them and get them the support they need to succeed. Standardized testing helps us to hold schools accountable for giving ALL students the education they deserve.

How Is Connecticut Dealing With Concerns About Over-Testing?

The state's required standardized test is offered annually and actually takes up very little of a student's time. In fact, the latest version of the state test, called the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) test, takes about the same amount of time as did the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT)--which has been the state test for over two decades.

However, additional layers of testing have been added over time to many districts' assessment systems--some of which may no longer be necessary. Recognizing this trend, the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) is working to help districts audit their testing systems to eliminate extra tests.

Recently, the CSDE announced a \$450,000 program to provide districts with the technical expertise to maximize instructional time and use tests wisely to support instruction.

What Are Summative and Formative Assessments?

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Summative tests measure student learning by comparing achievement against benchmarks at the end of a specified period of time. Summative tests can be used for accountability purposes. In contrast, formative tests can be offered more frequently during the specified period of time to provide teachers with feedback so they can modify instruction and keep students on track. A balanced system will use a reasonable combination of both forms of testing.

What Are the Smarter Balanced Assessments?

The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) is a group of 22 states that have worked collaboratively to develop a modern testing system that can accurately measure student learning aligned to the Common Core State Standards. Connecticut educators were involved in this effort.

Since Common Core sets higher expectations for students--asking them to learn more than ever before--the SBAC is a more rigorous test than any previously used. Beyond measuring fact memorization, it examines how well students are mastering the knowledge and skills that they will need in preparation for the jobs of the future. These tests are taken on the computer, and they adjust the difficulty of questions based upon a student's answers to previous questions. This allows us to measure a student's knowledge and skills much more accurately; it allows students to complete the tests in less time than in previous assessment systems; and the results of these next generation tests will be made available much faster than the results from traditional paper and pencil tests.

In addition, the SBAC test can eliminate many local tests because it includes materials to help teachers ensure that instruction is aligned with the new standards in English and Mathematics.

Who Else Supports Annual Statewide Testing?

Aside from our six organizations, a number of American organizations support fair, annual testing--including many civil rights and business organizations, such as: American Association of University Women, Association of University Centers on Disabilities, Business Roundtable, Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates, Children's Defense Fund, Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund, The Education Trust, U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, Institute for Educational Leadership, The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, League of United Latin American Citizens, Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, NAACP, National Association of Councils on Developmental Disabilities, National Center for Learning Disabilities, National Congress of American Indians, National Council of La Raza, National Disability Rights Network, National Indian Education Association, National Urban League, National Women's Law Center, Partners for Each and Every Child, Teach Plus, and United Negro College Fund.

Why Can't Teachers Write Their Own Assessments? Individual teachers can and do write tests about their own lessons--to understand how well their students are progressing. In fact, the Common Core gives teachers the flexibility to develop their own curricular materials, including tests. However, teacher-written tests alone cannot determine how well our state policies and investments in education are working. For accountability purposes, teacher-written tests must be supplemented by standardized tests that are statistically valid and reliable.

