

Illinois' Transition To New Assessments Spring 2015

Illinois students this spring will take new state assessments that, like the new Illinois Learning Standards, challenge them to think deeply, write often and defend their reasoning – all skills they will need in the world.

Called PARCC, the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Career covers math and English Language Arts in grades 3 through high school. This replaces old standardized tests – specifically, the Illinois Standards Achievement Tests given in grades three through eight, and the Prairie State Achievement Exam in high school.

Here's how Illinois' old and new state assessments compare.

The Old Assessment

Rarely measured students' deeper learning.

Questions typically focused on comprehension and information recall rather than conceptual understanding.

Did not assess writing.

Did not reflect state learning standards to measure college and career readiness.

When standards and assessments do not align, test prep can encroach on instructional time as often occurred with ISAT.

Unaligned across grade levels.

For years, Illinois had a two-tiered assessment system that created a disconnect between grade schools and high schools, confusing students, families and educators alike.

Intended to rank students.

Previous state assessments such as the ACT are norm referenced – that is, they are intended to sort students based on average scores rather than on students' proven command of concepts.

Reported results months later.

Students and teachers typically received the assessment results when it was too late to provide support.

Relied on local assessments to support instruction.

Many school districts used local resources to provide diagnostic assessments because of their instructional value, and because the state did not provide them. Districts without financial means have no such tool. This is an issue of equity in a state with some of the largest achievement gaps nationwide.

High school assessments did not align with instruction.

While the ACT exam serves the important purpose of exposing all students to a college entrance exam, and WorkKeys can be used to measure workplace readiness, neither is aligned to the college and career readiness standards.

High school assessments were not used for placement.

Illinois high school students took an additional, separate assessment to determine their placement in postsecondary courses. Studies suggest these often misidentify students for remediation, which hurts students and families.

The New Assessment

Measures students' deeper learning.

Questions require students to handle complex material, support arguments with evidence and explain reasoning when solving problems.

Assesses writing.

Students will write often both within the English language arts and math portions of the assessment.

Reflects the new learning standards to measure college and career readiness.

The new Illinois Learning Standards make clear what students should know and be able to do at every step in their academic progression toward college and career readiness. These are at the root of the new assessments.

Aligns across grade levels to track a student's progress.

The new assessment system spans grades three through eleven to reflect the progression of skills and knowledge needed to be college and career ready.

Captures what students know and are able to do.

The new assessments are not intended to rank students, but rather are designed to capture students' mastery of grade-level standards.

Reports results within weeks.

The more timely feedback enables educators to adjust their instruction and direct support to students who need it. NOTE: This will not occur during the first year due to the initial time required to determine performance levels.

Supports instruction with aligned formative assessments and other tools.

Teachers no longer will have to translate between assessment systems to gain an early window into teaching and learning. The mid-year formative test supports classroom instruction and enables districts to streamline their number of assessments.

High school assessments could serve as end-of-course exams and be included in grades.

Grades matter – research and our own observations tell us this. Because PARCC includes an end-of-course assessment, this could serve as a course final and be integrated into course grades. This further integrates the assessment into the instructional process.

High school assessments used for college placement.

As a start, community colleges will accept a PARCC score of 4 or 5 (viewed as mastery) for purposes of college placement. This means that students need not take remedial courses if they demonstrate an appropriate level of mastery.