

Smarter Balanced Assessment

As schools across Connecticut transition to the new assessment system called “Smarter Balanced,” questions have arisen about the new tests and their relationship to the **Connecticut Core Standards**. I would like to address a few of these questions here, and I would also like to invite any New Canaan Public School parent interested in learning more to attend one of the meetings scheduled for parents at each level (elementary, middle, and high) in the next few weeks. – Dr. Bryan Luizzi

Smarter Balanced: FAQs

Why are we implementing a new assessment system in Connecticut?

In 2010, Connecticut, along with 44 other states, adopted the Common Core State Standards in mathematics and English/language arts. The shift to new standards required, among other things, the development and implementation of a new assessment system to measure the success of schools and students in teaching and learning in relationship to those standards. Previously, the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) and Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT) measured student and school performance in relationship to the prior Connecticut standards; with the move to the **Common Core State Standards (which Connecticut renamed the Connecticut Core Standards)**, these assessments became obsolete. 2015 marks the first year that Connecticut and other states are administering a new assessment protocol, aligned with the new standards.

What are the Connecticut Core standards, and why did Connecticut adopt them?

Connecticut Core standards (known elsewhere as the Common Core State Standards), were developed collaboratively by teachers, administrators, and elected officials from across the United States through a process that originated with a group of governors and state school officers. Connecticut’s State Board of Education voted to adopt these standards in 2010. The standards have not been federally imposed on Connecticut or any other state; each state voluntarily adopted the standards and has the freedom to edit and modify the standards to meet the particular need of their individual state. Like many other states, Connecticut adopted the Connecticut Core Standards with the belief that they will raise expectations to a consistently high level for all students. Before adopting the Connecticut Core Standards, Connecticut had its own state standards that served the same purposes of informing district curriculum and statewide assessments; however, many regard the previous standards as inferior to the new standards, and believe the new, more demanding Connecticut Core Standards will result in increased expectations and learning outcomes for all students.

What impact do the new standards have on our schools?

Some people have expressed concern that the Connecticut Core Standards dictate curriculum and instruction in New Canaan and elsewhere. This is simply not the case. Standards define what students in each grade should know and be able to do; they do not dictate how educators should teach or how students should learn. Our educators will continue to develop lesson plans and to tailor instruction to the individual needs of each student in their classrooms. Our instructional leaders will continue working collaboratively to develop curriculum, units, and lessons aligned with the standards and focused on best practices. The standards themselves are not a curriculum; instead, they inform our work, and our skilled educators develop and deliver meaningful and relevant learning experiences for our students in all grades. Before the Connecticut Core Standards, a similar process was followed using the previous Connecticut Standards. With the new standards, we have been revising and updating our curricula for all of our students, and we have been quite pleased by the outcome of this work these past years.

Please be confident that decisions about curriculum and instruction have been, and will remain, the purview of our expert educators, administrators, and Board of Education.

Who will be taking the new assessments?

The Elementary and Secondary Education act of 1965 (ESEA) requires all states to implement “high quality yearly student academic assessments” [20 U.S.C. § 6311(b) (3)(A)]. Under “No Child Left Behind,” which amended the ESEA in 2001, all students in grades 3-8, and one grade in high school, must be tested. Connecticut General Statutes also reflect this assessment requirement, stating, “each student enrolled in grades three to eight, inclusive, and grade ten or eleven in any public school shall, annually, take a mastery examination in reading, writing and mathematics” [CGS 10-14n]. For over 15 years, Connecticut school districts met this requirement by administering the Connecticut Mastery Test (grades 3-8) and the Connecticut Academic Performance Test (grade 10) to students in reading, writing, mathematics, and science. Beginning this year, Connecticut school districts must use the Smarter Balanced assessment to meet this requirement in math and English/Language arts. Schools will continue to administer the CMT/CAPT in science as well.

Will the new tests take more time to administer than the CMT/CAPT did in the past?

We anticipate that the tests will take approximately the same amount of time to administer as the CMT/CAPT of past years. Additionally, since our education program has purposefully incorporated state standards and expectations, our students are well prepared for this experience with no additional “test-prep” necessary.

How are the Smarter Balanced assessments different from the CMT/CAPT?

Just as the CMT/CAPT measured the previous Connecticut standards, the Smarter Balanced has been designed to measure what students know and are able to do in relation to the new Connecticut Core Standards. Unlike the paper and pencil CMT/CAPT, however, the Smarter Balanced uses a Computerized Adaptive Testing (CAT) approach. CAT assessments adapt to student responses by adjusting the difficulty of questions based on previous responses; in so doing, they provide better information for educators, are more efficient and secure, and make available more accurate results for students, parents, teachers, and schools. In recent years, assessments such as the Graduate Management Admissions Test (GMAT) and the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) have implemented CAT methodology in their assessments.

Is the Connecticut State Department of Education collecting additional data as a result of the Connecticut Core State Standards or the Smarter Balanced assessment?

The CSDE is not collecting any new data as a result of the Connecticut Core Standards or the Smarter Balanced assessments. The Smarter Balanced assessments simply take the place of the CMT and the CAPT, and the same types of data will be collected. The CSDE complies with all federal laws regarding data protection and the privacy of educational records, including Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), state statutes, and guidelines to protect confidential data.

How will the results from the Smarter Balanced Assessment be used?

These statewide assessments provide us the opportunity to learn about our students, our individual programs, and our schools, and are also one of the ways students can meet NCHS graduation performance standards in reading, writing, and mathematics. The information gained from the Smarter Balanced will become part of each child’s academic record; additionally,

Smarter Balanced performance levels and participation rates will be used as sources of comparative data for schools and districts statewide.

How have they tested these new assessments?

Although there will inevitably be some flaws in the early administrations of the Smarter Balanced assessments, as there were with the CMT/CAPT, a great deal of work has gone into the preparations for this year's assessment. For the past few years, Smarter Balanced has incrementally tested the content of the assessments and the technology that supports the assessment. As part of that process, Smarter Balanced has completed cognitive lab tests, in which students provided feedback to test developers about their experience with the test questions, accommodations for students with special needs, and the testing software itself; small scale trials, where questions and software features were tried out with hundreds of students; and field tests, where students from approximately 5,000 schools across the country (including New Canaan and most other districts in CT) participated in a preliminary experience to develop and validate appropriate test questions and performance tasks.

What should I do if I have more questions about the Smarter Balanced tests and/or the Connecticut Core Standards?

The New Canaan Public Schools will continue to update our website (www.ncps-k12.org) with timely information about these topics. If you have any questions or concerns about the upcoming administration of the Smarter Balanced in your school, please try to attend the grade-appropriate meeting scheduled at the schools; information can be found in the PTC/PFA newsletters. (NCHS at 1:30 on Tuesday, 3/24; Saxe on Wednesday, 3/25 at 11:00; South Hall on Thursday, 3/26 at 1:30) Additionally, you are encouraged to contact your building administrator to share any feedback and/or concerns and to learn more about this year's administration of the assessments.

Both regionally and nationally, there has been a great deal of conversation about the new Smarter Balanced tests and the Common Core Standards. Please be assured that the New Canaan public schools are committed to continuously monitoring and adjusting our curricular, instructional, and assessment practices in response to the ever-changing needs of today's learners. We strive to ensure that every classroom is an active and dynamic place, full of energy, excitement, curiosity, exploration, creativity, and discovery. Our outstanding teachers, instructional leaders, support staff, administrators, and Board of Education work together on behalf of our students every day, and each are committed to doing all they can to provide a rich and rewarding educational experience for all students in our schools.