

Some Myths and Facts About Assessment and PARCC

The PASS model refers to the term "parent" as any adult who plays an important role in a child's family life.

High-quality academic standards, such as the Common Core Standards, outline what all students should know and be able to do in English language arts, reading and mathematics from kindergarten until graduation. The new standards reflect the knowledge and skills needed to successfully enter college and/or the workforce and are benchmarked to the standards of the world's top-performing countries.

To measure student understanding of the knowledge and skills outlined in the academic standards that they learned throughout the school year, the state requires all students to take an annual assessment. For the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 school years, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career (PARCC) assessment will replace the NJ ASK test and High School Proficiency Assessment that were aligned with the former set of standards. In addition to setting new performance benchmarks, the assessment is different from prior state assessments in delivery, complexity and timing. The assessment is computer-based and features varied and sophisticated questions—including performance-based items designed to evaluate students' problem-solving and critical-thinking skills.

The current high academic standards help students learn the skills that they need to succeed in their future, and the PARCC assessment will measure how well they have learned those skills. The results of the tests are also intended to help educators adjust instruction for individuals and groups of students.

As New Jersey and other states across the nation completed the first administration of PARCC, teachers, students, parents and the public are learning more about the tests and the need for next-generation assessments. There is a growing interest in the new ideas and methods of teaching and learning and the potential hurdles that surround a new testing program.

The following Myths & Facts provide information to clarify information about PARCC and its implementation in New Jersey.

** This document is intended to complement the release of information about the New Jersey Department of Education's Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career (PARCC) Assessment. See the department's website for a FAQ document aligned with this document at <http://www.state.nj.us/education/assessment/PARCCFAQ.pdf>. Find additional information at (<http://www.state.nj.us/education/assessment/memos/> and <http://www.state.nj.us/education/assessment/>). Other support documents for use at a Parent Academy for Student Success (PASS) event are located here: <http://www.state.nj.us/education/sca/toolkit/>.*

Myths & Facts about the PARCC Assessments

Myth: *National tests have little to do with New Jersey students.*

Fact: Groups of states came together to form two different partnerships to create new assessments that would be aligned with the Common Core Standards. The New Jersey State Board of Education chose to work with the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). State educators at all levels provided input into the development of the tests. New Jersey educators know our students best and continue to be involved in developing and refining items for the assessment. Input from our educators is a key part of implementing the PARCC assessments that measure student progress toward preparing all students for success in their futures.

Myth: *Parents and other New Jersey residents know nothing, or very little, about the PARCC tests.*

Fact: PARCC stands for the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career (PARCC) assessments. For the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 school years, PARCC is the annual state assessment for students in New Jersey public schools. The new computer-based tests have replaced the former paper-and-pencil-based NJ ASK and HSPA exams that were aligned with an outdated set of student learning standards in math and English language arts. The student learning standards have been updated and are called the Common Core Standards. In order to remain current and to provide students with the best education possible, the common core standards are once again under review. The PARCC tests measure a student's understanding and ability to demonstrate their knowledge and skills required by the standards. The PARCC assessment is designed to provide annual feedback on whether students are on track and on time to be properly prepared for high school graduation, college entrance and the workplace. In addition, PARCC will provide schools with meaningful data to help improve classroom instruction and raise student performance.

PARCC aims for complete transparency. The public can view all of the key documents describing the assessment such as: content specifications; item specifications; training materials; test blueprints; accommodations framework; achievement level descriptors; technology specifications; etc. These and many other resources are available to the public on the PARCC website at <http://www.parcconline.org/>. Practice tests are also available to the public on the PARCC website for each tested grade and both subject areas (English language arts/literacy and math) at: <http://www.learningandteaching.info/teaching/assessment.htm>. The New Jersey Department of Education also provides information on its PARCC website at: <http://www.state.nj.us/education/assessment/>. Every school district in the state has information on the PARCC tests for their students. Parents and other residents are encouraged to become aware of the conversations surrounding implementation of PARCC and to review information on PARCC at any of the resources above.

Myth: *PARCC assessments are untested and not valid.*

Fact: PARCC has incrementally tested the content of the assessment and the technology that will support it. In spring 2014, a large number of New Jersey school districts and charter schools across the state volunteered to participate in field-testing for the state assessments (PARCC). The field-test involved thousands of NJ students in NJ schools and gathered valuable information for final evaluation of item quality. New Jersey conducted PARCC field-tests to present the entire pool of test items to students and educators. The field-tests gave school districts the opportunity to experience the content of the new PARCC exams, as well as the process for administering the computer-based assessments. Students and teachers provided feedback to the state and test developers about their experience with the test questions, accommodations for students with special needs and the testing software.

The PARCC consortium used lessons learned from field-tests to ensure that the tests in the 2014-15 school year, and those to be administered in 2015-2016 are the best possible assessments. In 2014-2015 over 800,000 students in New Jersey took the PARCC exam and researchers and teams of educators from the state have examined and will continue to examine the accessibility and fairness of test questions in addition to the following: the quality of accommodations for students who need them; how well test questions measure performance on relevant content; whether the tests can be linked to international tests to see how American students do compared to students abroad; whether the length of time given to students to complete the assessment is appropriate; and how performance on the computer-based version compares to the paper-based version, and more.

A summary of New Jersey Lessons Learned from field-tests are located:

<http://www.state.nj.us/education/assessment/memos/120214PARCCLessonslearned.pdf>

Myth: *Our students do not need new learning standards or new types of testing.*

Fact: Expectations of the global workforce continue to change, and if our children are to be internationally competitive when they graduate from high school, our education system must also change. It is vital that our education system better prepare students by providing them with knowledge and new opportunities to develop and demonstrate their skills through new methods. We must think differently than in the past in order to prepare our young people for their future.

"We may not be able to prepare the future for our children, but we can at least prepare our children for their future."

-Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1940

We've long told students that they are doing a good job throughout middle and high school, only to have them enter college or the workforce and find they aren't able to do what is expected. Many graduating students must accept unpaid internships in order to learn trade skills for direct employment, and too many college-bound students find themselves paying for remedial courses in their first college semester.

Only 39 percent of students who took the ACT college-entrance exam in 2013 met all four of the ACT college readiness benchmarks in English, math, reading and science. This reality left two options for these students: find alternatives to college or parents and/or students would have to pay for additional remedial courses to build students' knowledge to enable them to perform in credit-bearing college classes.

In addition, through the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce, employers state that students who have not been taught under the higher academic standards and measured with the aligned PARCC assessments have lower levels of preparation for admission to workforce training programs and passage of licensing exams. Under-preparation leaves young people at a high risk of unemployment or underemployment.

Myth: *The PARCC test is federally mandated and represents a new federal intrusion into local education.*

Fact: For decades, Congress has required assessments of student learning for accountability under the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)*. The 2001 reauthorization of *ESEA*, known as the *No Child Left Behind Act*, expanded federal testing requirements to include state testing of every student in English language arts and mathematics in grades 3 through 8 and once in high school. In New Jersey, state assessments and required annual testing have been around since the 1970's, well before the *2001 No Child Left Behind Act*.

Myth: *The PARCC assessment interferes with student privacy rights and will result in the collection and tracking of intrusive and inappropriate data on children.*

Fact: Participation in PARCC does not require student-identifiable data sharing or reporting. The federal government does not have, and New Jersey will not provide, access to individual student-level data. In addition, the state will not share identifiable student-level data with marketers, contractors or distributors. Protections intended to prevent student-identifiable data from being marketed or distributed are in place at both the state and federal levels.

PARCC will collect basic demographic data in order to learn about subgroup performance for accountability purposes, but they will not report any assessment or demographic information at the individual student level.

New Jersey will adhere to all federal and state privacy laws which prohibit the creation of a federal database with students' personally identifiable information, including but not limited to, the *Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)*, the *Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) of 2008*, *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)* legislation amending the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, the *Education Reform Sciences Act of 2002*, and the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)* because they all prohibit the creation of a federal database with students' personally identifiable information.

Myth: *The state and federal governments require too much testing and it is taking valuable time away from teaching and learning.*

Fact: These concerns merit continual attention by district and state officials. The state requires only an annual test to measure student learning and the quality of instruction that is provided to students. Within a 30-day testing window, the district develops its own testing schedules. Parents' interest in the amount of student testing has provided individual school district officials with the opportunity to discuss and clarify concerns about the entire testing program for the students in the district.

The state will require PARCC testing for the following:

- Students in grades 3-11 will be tested annually in English language arts.
- Students in grades 3-8 will be tested annually in mathematics.
- Students in Algebra I, Geometry, and Algebra II will take an end-of-course exam.

PARCC provides parents with meaningful information on whether their children are on track and on time with their learning. Parents want to know what their child does well, where they struggle and how they can help their child succeed. That is the most important point for all stakeholders to remember.

It is a priority of NJ education officials and district leaders to ensure that every district- and state-required test is of high quality, providing the information needed for specific school and district purposes, and is supported by structures and routines that ensure that assessment results are used in a meaningful way, including action steps to be taken that will help students.

This issue prompts two points of specific interest:

1. The same concerns have arisen each time that the state has updated annual tests to measure student performance. There have not been problems transitioning to other new annual state tests.
2. Both the state and federal governments are currently considering the issue of assessment structure.
 - At the federal level, Congress is working toward the reauthorization of the federal *No Child Left Behind Act* that outlines the states' accountability to ensure a high-quality assessment of every student and a high level of quality for each school in the state. So far, annual testing will remain part of the law.
 - At the state level, through an Executive Order in 2014, Governor Chris Christie created a commission charged with presenting recommendations regarding the quality and effectiveness of student assessments administered to New Jersey students in kindergarten through grade 11, including "the volume, frequency, and impact of student testing." In a preliminary report released on 1/23/15, the *Study Commission on the Use of Student Assessments in New Jersey* recommended that "every district review the universe of tests and quizzes being given in classrooms". Interested individuals can view the report here: (<http://www.nj.gov/education/studycommission/InterimReport.pdf>).

Districts will provide the schedule of testing dates and times. The PARCC testing schedule can be viewed at: <http://www.state.nj.us/education/assessment/schedule.pdf>. A schedule module is also available at: <http://www.state.nj.us/education/assessment/parcc/SchedulingModule.pdf>.

Myth: *Costs of the PARCC assessments are unknown.*

Fact: The state is committed to wise and responsible investments in the quality of our education system so that every child is provided with an excellent opportunity for a successful and enriched future.

Of the nearly \$19,000 dollars the state spends on a typical student's education each year, about \$29 goes to statewide assessments. There is no local cost involved in developing or scoring the PARCC exams. None of the costs for PARCC exams comes directly from the local school budget.

Myth: PARCC tests will require advanced technology that schools do not have and cannot afford.

Fact: The PARCC assessment is designed to work with the current computing resources in schools. The assessments can be offered on old operating systems and require only the minimum processors and memory to run the operating system itself. Likewise, the file size for individual assessment items will be very small to minimize the network bandwidth necessary to deliver the assessment online. For example, a 600-student middle school could test its students using only a 30-computer lab.

Some parents are concerned that the tests will be administered with a computer rather than with paper and a pencil. PARCC has many features that align with the way that many of our students currently work and learn at home and at school. Responding to PARCC test questions will require students to use basic computer skills, such as typing, highlighting, enlarging text, and using a text-to-speech feature. All students have earphones while taking PARCC. All teachers, especially technology teachers, help students develop the skills needed for the PARCC testing, making sure students practice answering questions in English language arts and mathematics and that students use computers during regular class hours to sharpen the skills required for PARCC.

Younger students receive computer instruction on a regular basis all throughout the school year. They too, will be prepared to use the computer as a tool to answer questions on the PARCC tests. Students who require adaptations for computer use will be provided with the appropriate accommodations and will receive the support they need to perform at their best. Information on PARCC accommodations can be found at: <http://www.state.nj.us/education/assessment/accommodations/>.

Parents of some older students are not clear if computer-based assessments are necessary for graduation, college entrance, or careers directly out of high school. Computer tests are becoming common for all of today's students. For instance:

- The GED test - to receive a high school degree - is now computer-based.
- The SAT college-entrance exams are under revision and will soon be computer-based.
- College placement assessments and college-level work require more sophisticated computer skills.
- Workforce training programs and licensing exams regularly require a component of computer use.
- Many school districts have incorporated computer literacy into their curriculum.
- Some states have had online textbooks and all-electronic assessments for years.

Students who successfully use social media, video games, online research, and other features of mobile and home computers will be prepared for the computer requirements of the PARCC tests. In order to prepare all students for the future, teachers and students need high-quality data, tools and resources to support, teaching, student learning, and assessment .

Myth: Taking PARCC tests cannot improve teaching and learning.

Fact: PARCC can improve teaching and learning by supporting the core competencies outlined in the Common Core Standards. The CCS provide guidance for teachers and schools to help students succeed.

As a student progresses through each grade, the PARCC tests serve as measurements of learning and skill development. PARCC results will help ensure that students are on time and on target in their learning and that they receive the instruction and support they may need to do so.

Such timely and meaningful assessment outcomes can offer specific information about performance so that students can increase their own efforts, teachers can follow up with targeted instruction, parents can support their children, and administrators and policymakers can more fully understand what students need to know and can do in order to guide curriculum and professional development decisions.

PARCC assessments offer significant educational improvements over tests of the past, including writing at every grade, new question types, and performance tasks that ask students to demonstrate an array of research, writing, and problem-solving skills. PARCC assessments also make use of computer adaptive technology, which provides more accurate information about student achievement. Because the assessments are administered online, teachers, principals and parents can receive results of end-of-year assessments as in the past. However, the results of the 2014-2015 tests were delayed so that a new scoring system could be developed.

The performance levels on the score report describe how well students met the academic expectations for their grade level.

Level 1: Did not yet meet expectations

Level 2: partially met expectations

Level 3: Approached expectations

Level 4: Met expectations

Level 5: Exceeded expectations

Myth: Individual students do not benefit from taking the PARCC tests.

Fact: The PARCC assessment measures each student's real-world skills that colleges and employers value, such as critical thinking, strategies and problem solving. When students graduate from high school, these are very important skills for both business and higher education.

PARCC is coordinating with postsecondary leaders in each state to prepare their higher education systems for the development and deployment of the PARCC college and career ready high school assessments and the supports and interventions that will accompany them. Find more information at:

<http://www.parcconline.org/postsecondary>. Students interested in college after graduation can view a list of participating institutions [here](#). The list continues to expand and is projected to increase exponentially after the first national administration of the PARCC tests.

Myth: The PARCC tests are too different from previous tests.

Fact: The PARCC assessments were created to help students better meet the rigorous demands of college and careers. PARCC includes a number of differences from previous assessments.

PARCC assessments:

- Measure students' ability to apply and demonstrate knowledge of concepts rather than memorize facts.
- Replace the former paper-and-pencil-based NJ ASK and HSPA exams in English language arts and math.
- Require students to think and perform differently. Students will be given more time to work through the questions and provide their answers. They won't be overloaded with long periods of time testing on one day. The tests are broken up into smaller parts and given over several days. In fact, the 2015-2016 version of PARCC is shorter than last year's test.
- Include more students and grade levels than previous annual state assessments.
- Provide an online reporting system that will result in clear, easy-to-understand data on student achievement and growth. These reports will provide parents, teachers, principals, and other local and state leaders with information on student progress to inform instruction and provide targeted student support.
- Include accommodations for students with disabilities and English language learners so that the progress of all students can be accurately measured (<http://www.state.nj.us/education/assessment/accommodations/>).
- Include performance tasks that allow students to demonstrate research, writing and analytical skills.
 - Writing will be built into the reading assessment. Students will read material given to them and will be asked questions. Students will be required to use evidence from that reading to support their answers. This is very different from what and how students learned in the past, but it is how they are expected to perform in real-world employment.

- Multiple-choice questions will have multiple parts and require students to choose from more than one correct answer. Students must think through various options to solve problems, make choices, come to decisions and find the best answer(s) to a complex challenge just like in the workplace.
- Math questions will require students to apply reasoning and justify their answers. This expectation requires students to work through the steps to solve problems and then explain how they got their answers. This helps them find information, analyze it, compare it to different information and develop the ability to solve similar problems repeatedly throughout daily life or in the workplace.

Myth: *The PARCC tests are too difficult.*

Fact: PARCC tests are designed to more thoroughly measure students’ understanding of English language arts and mathematics than did previous tests. A “difficult” test is different from a “challenging” one. The PARCC tests are intended to present new challenges to help students think critically and move beyond memorization so that as they continue to grow and learn they will achieve more success.

In education today, there is a purposeful effort to challenge students and create challenging work for them because it excites and intellectually motivates learners to perform at higher levels. Instruction and questions that push students to understand important ideas, think deeper, use information relevant to them, apply their knowledge in relation to their futures, and demonstrate mastery of their skills are the types of activities that good teachers use in their daily instruction. Engaging in challenging learning tasks and challenging assessments allow students to become better prepared for demonstrating the knowledge, skills, types of thinking, and problem-solving skills expected in the workplace.

Parents and other stakeholders can examine sample PARCC questions and look at the practice tests at <http://www.parcconline.org/samples/item-task-prototypes>. The samples are intended to provide exposure to the process that students will experience on the tests and not the specific content.

Adults examining the sample test questions will quickly realize that prior to 2010, student instruction did not include the updated student learning standards, nor did it include the types of questions on the PARCC tests. Therefore, for individuals that graduated from high school before 2010, the sample questions and testing processes may pose new challenges and appear different from those expected by previous learners.

PARCC tests mirror the kind of high-quality work students are already doing in effective classrooms every day.

Myth: *PARCC will require teachers to “teach to the test.”*

Fact: PARCC is designed for students to demonstrate their understanding of a concept, apply that knowledge, and use their skills to produce a result. Since PARCC is a very different type of test where students demonstrate and develop their own work teachers really *can’t* teach to the test.

The best way for students to prepare for PARCC assessments is to learn with the state’s academic standards. Because PARCC is completely aligned with the standards, teaching a standards-aligned curriculum is the best way to put students in the position to succeed. If students understand the concepts, they should do well on the PARCC tests.

Myth: *PARCC tests will result in standardized teaching and learning in NJ and every other state.*

Fact: PARCC is built on the knowledge and skills that the business community and institutions of higher education consistently state are necessary for students to be better prepared for college and the workplace. PARCC assessments measure the knowledge and skills students obtain from our education system. Remedial education and unemployment rates indicate that students are not currently exiting high schools with the knowledge and skills necessary for college admission or workforce training programs. Higher learning standards and performance levels and quality standardized tests are ways of gauging what students are learning and how well they are being prepared for their futures.

Standardized tests have another very important and highly valued purpose. May 2014 marked sixty years since the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling that ended segregation in America's public schools. Yet, separate and unequal student expectations and resources have remained a reality for many students. Even a significant number of "privileged" students who graduate from high school still need remediation and academic support before they are ready for college-level courses, workforce training programs or direct employment. All of our children deserve an equal opportunity and support for success. PARCC tests will help schools evaluate how well their students perform by comparing combined data from each school with the combined data from other schools across the state and nation. By establishing consistent learning goals for all students, PARCC will help ensure that all children graduate from high school ready for success in college and career regardless of their zip code.

Standardized testing has been a priority and presence in New Jersey for decades. The state requires that high learning standards be set for all students and annual standardized tests in math and English language arts are administered to all students in grades three through eleven. Setting high common academic standards and fairly measuring how our students are learning the knowledge and skills required under those standards (PARCC) offers tremendous potential to raise the level of education and bridge learning gaps facing our children and the nation.

Myth: *Students with special learning needs can't succeed with PARCC.*

Fact: Both the *No Child Left Behind Act* and the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004* require that **all** students participate in statewide assessments in the grades and subjects tested. The purpose is to ensure that achievement of the state's standards is required for **all** students. Instruction for all New Jersey students is based on the state's academic standards. Students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) or 504 plans receive instruction aligned with the state standards. The majority of students with IEPs will participate in the PARCC assessments with appropriate accommodations, approved by PARCC, and listed in their IEPs. All students with 504 plans will participate in the PARCC assessments with appropriate accommodations, approved by PARCC, and listed in their 504 plan. The *PARCC Accessibility Features and Accommodations Manual* provides details on this very important benefit of the PARCC assessment system at: http://www.parcconline.org/sites/parcc/files/parcc-accessibility-features-accommodations-manual-11-14_final.pdf . A small percentage of students with IEPs who have the most significant intellectual disabilities will participate in the Dynamic Learning Maps Assessment (DLM). More information on this assessment, including criteria IEP teams will use to determine if the DLM is appropriate for a student, is available at: <http://dynamiclearningmaps.org/>

Myth: *English language learners can take PARCC.*

Fact: Those students in kindergarten through 12th grade who have been identified as English Language Learners (ELLs) can take an exam called ACCESS for ELLs. It is an English language proficiency assessment administered annually in World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) Consortium member states, which includes New Jersey. The test also monitors students' progress in acquiring academic English. For programs funded by Title III of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)*, all ELLs are required to take the ACCESS for ELLs (K-12) assessment annually. For more information about ACCESS for ELLs 2.0, go to <http://www.nj.gov/education/bilingual/ells/20/>

*The New Jersey Department of Education's model for home/school partnerships – **The Parent Academy for Student Success (PASS)** provides documents and support tools intended to complement information about the state's academic standards and annual assessments for students. The PASS model provides resources, materials, and opportunities for parents and educators to build home/school partnerships in the best interest of students' academic success. For information on the NJDOE PASS model go to: <http://www.state.nj.us/education/sca/toolkit/>. Please send questions to: informccss@doe.state.nj.us.*