Ear buds, computers needed for new standardized tests

February 16 2015, byKimberly Hefling And Julie Carr Smyth

In this photo taken Feb. 12, 2015, sixth grade teacher Carrie Young, back center, answers questions from her students about an exercise on their laptops as they practice for the the Common Core State Standards Test in her classroom at Morgan Elementary School South in Stockport, Ohio. On Tuesday, Ohio becomes the first state to administer one of two tests in English language arts and math based on the Common Core standards developed by two separate groups of states. By the end of the year, about 12 million children in 28 states and the District of Columbia will take exams that are expected to be harder than traditional spring standardized state tests they replace. In some states, they'll require hours of additional testing time students will have to do more than just fill in the bubble. The goal is to test students on critical thinking skills, requiring them to describe their reasoning and solve problems. (AP Photo/Ty Wright)

Sixth-grader Kayla Hunter considers herself pretty tech savvy. She has a computer at home unlike about half her classmates at her elementary school. And it matches up well with the one she'll use this week to take a new test linked to the Common Core standards.

Still, the perky 11-year-old worries. During a recent practice exam at her school in Ohio, she couldn't even log on. "It wouldn't let me," she said. "It kept saying it wasn't right, and it just kept loading the whole time."

Her state on Tuesday will be the first to administer one of two tests in English language arts and math based on the Common Core standards developed by two separate groups of states. By the end of the school year, about 12 million children in 29 states and the District of Columbia will take them, using computers or electronic tablets.

The exams are expected to be more difficult than the traditional spring standardized state exams they replace. In some states, they'll require hours of additional testing time because students will have to do more than just fill in the bubble. The goal is to test students on critical thinking skills, requiring them to describe their reasoning and solve problems.

The tests have multimedia components, written essays and multi-step calculations needed to solve math problems that go beyond just using rote memory. Students in some states will take adaptive versions in which questions get harder or easier depending on their answers.

But there's been controversy.

The tests have been caught up in the debate playing out in state legislatures across the country about the federal role in education.

Although more than 40 states have adopted Common Core, which spells out what reading and math skills students should master in each grade, several have decided not to offer the tests—known as the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, and Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or PARCC. Some states are introducing other new state standardized tests this year.

The Common Core tests fulfill the requirement in the federal No Child Left Behind law for annual testing in reading and math in grades three to eight and again in high school. But as Congress seeks to rewrite the education law, there's debate over whether the tests should be required by Washington, and whether students are being tested too much. Parents in pockets of the country have joined a movement to "opt out" of these standardized tests.

Questions also have been raised about students' keyboarding skills and schools' computer capacities.

In the Appalachian foothills where Kayla attends Morgan South Elementary School, administrators and teachers worry that they don't have the bandwidth to provide reliable Internet connectivity on testing day. Both tests offer a paper option. PARCC officials anticipate that about a quarter of students will use the paper version; Smarter Balanced officials estimate roughly 10 to 20 percent will take it on paper.

In this photo taken Feb. 12, 2015, sixth grader Alex Greuey, 11, reads through a problem in the English Language Arts section of the PARCC (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers) test as he and his classmates practice for the Common Core State Standards Exams at Morgan Elementary School South in Stockport, Ohio. On Tuesday, Ohio becomes the first state to administer one of two tests in English language arts and math based on the Common Core standards developed by two separate groups of states. By the end of the year, about 12 million children in 28 states and the District of Columbia will take exams that are expected to be harder than traditional spring standardized state tests they replace. In some states, they'll require hours of additional testing time students will have to do more than just fill in the bubble. The goal is to test students on critical thinking skills, requiring them to describe their reasoning and solve problems. (AP Photo/Ty Wright)

Just eight days before the test, the Morgan Local School District in rural southeastern Ohio ordered 200 more Chromebooks, which worked best during the practice run.
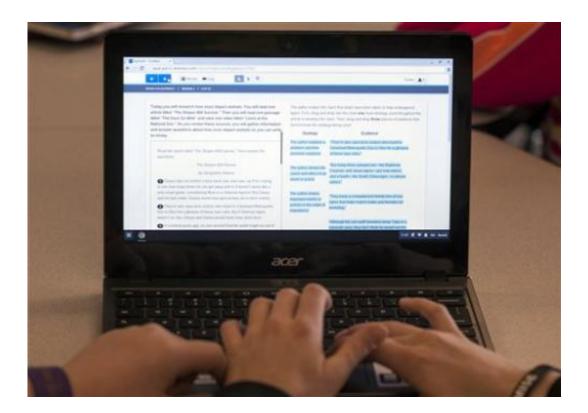
The week before the test, Kayla and her classmates huddled in pairs sharing what devices were available at the school. "They'll be more comfortable with the technology, but it is a worry of mine that, as far as the content that's on it, there's still stuff I could be doing to prepare for the test," says their teacher, Carrie Young.

Eleven-year-old Colton Kidd says the screens on the Chromebooks are too small. Classmate Josie Jackson, 12, prefers pencil and paper. But Liam Montgomery likes computerized tests: "It's easier to get the answers down, because I don't have to flip back and forth."

In some places, school administrators and state leaders are only grudgingly moving forward.

Referencing federal law, Illinois State Board of Education officials threatened to withhold funds from any district that didn't administer the PARCC exam. Chicago Public Schools officials cited technology concerns in announcing they won't give the exam in a majority of its schools.

In this photo taken Feb. 12, 2015, students in Carrie Young's sixth grade class work through an exercise on their laptops during a practice session to prepare for the the Common Core State Standards Test at Morgan Elementary School South in Stockport. On Tuesday, Ohio becomes the first state to administer one of two tests in English language arts and math based on the Common Core standards developed by two separate groups of states. By the end of the year, about 12 million children in 28 states and the District of Columbia will take exams that are expected to be harder than traditional spring standardized state tests they replace. In some states, they'll require hours of additional testing time students will have to do more than just fill in the bubble. The goal is to test students on critical thinking skills, requiring them to describe their reasoning and solve problems. (AP Photo/Ty Wright)

Trisha Kocanda, superintendent of the Winnetka Public Schools in Illinois, told parents that she's concerned about the length of the tests and the "excessive rigor."

"We grow wary," Kocanda said, adding, that they believe "this test continues the over-emphasis on standardized assessments as evaluation tools for students and schools."

In Louisiana, Gov. Bobby Jindal's effort to stop the PARCC exam was derailed by a state judge who said the governor's actions were harmful to parents, teachers and students. Jindal has said he took the action because he opposes what he views as federal intervention in the adoption of the standards.

Officials from the testing groups stand by the tests. In each of the states, students will see something that's familiar and something that's "new, different and exciting," said Tony Alpert, executive director for Smarter Balanced.

"Smarter Balanced took the best of what states had in their previous systems and we made sure each state had access to that," Alpert said.

In this photo taken Feb. 12, 2015, sixth grade teacher Carrie Young guides her students through an exercise on their laptops as practice for the the Common Core State Standards Test in her classroom at Morgan Elementary School South in Stockport, Ohio. On Tuesday, Ohio becomes the first state to administer one of two tests in English language arts and math based on the Common Core standards developed by two separate groups of states. By the end of the year, about 12 million children in 28 states and the District of Columbia will take exams that are expected to be harder than traditional spring standardized state tests they replace. In some states, they'll require hours of additional testing time students will have to do more than just fill in the bubble. The goal is to test students on critical thinking skills, requiring them to describe their reasoning and solve problems. (AP Photo/Ty Wright)

Laura Slover, the chief executive officer of PARCC, said the tests have an important equity component because parents can compare how their students are doing in comparison to students in other states.

Education Secretary Arne Duncan said states are going to "figure this out together."

"I think change is hard but anyone who thinks we should just do fill in the bubble tests and not look at critical thinking ... I don't quite understand that," Duncan said.

  More information: PARCC: parcc.pearson.com

Smarter Balanced: www.smarterbalanced.org