

# New standardized tests bring technical challenges, concern

May 6 2015, by Kimberly Hefling

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In this Feb. 12, 2015 file photo, practice test books sit on a table in the sixth grade English Language Arts and Social Studies classroom at Morgan Elementary School South in Stockport, Ohio. Call this the year of the test. Or, at least the year of standardized test mania. For all the headlines of technical test problems in some states and parents opting their children out of test taking, testing proponents say the roll out in much of the country this spring of new standardized tests taken on a computer has had relatively few major hitches. (AP Photo/Ty Wright, File)

Call this the year of the test. Or, at least the year of standardized test mania.

Standardized test season in K-12 classrooms has been dominated in some states by widespread technical problems or by parents allowing their children to opt out. But testing officials say the rollout this spring of new standardized tests taken by computer in many U.S. public schools has been without major problems in much of the country.

The next step? Seeing how students did—and how parents and educators respond. Test scores don't just inform parents of their child's progress; they are used to judge schools and teacher performance, too. The new exams are expected to be harder in many states than the state assessments they replaced, but they've been billed as a more accurate testing of what students are actually learning.

A student testing 101:

## TESTS ARE NEW

The new assessments developed by two groups of states are called Smarter Balanced and Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or PARCC. They are designed to be aligned to the Common Core state standards, which spell out what reading and language arts skills students in each grade should master. About 12 million students are taking the two tests in 29 states and the District of Columbia, along with 5,000 students in New York as part of a pilot program.

Additional states initially were to have participated, but dropped out. Legislators in Ohio and elsewhere continue to debate which standardized test to offer in the future.

## TECHNOLOGY CHANGES

The new exams were developed to be taken by computer, although paper and pencil tests are available. Districts have had to upgrade their Internet capabilities, buy new computers and teach keyboarding. The move is "really groundbreaking and unprecedented in our field," said Chris Domaleski, senior associate at the National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment.

## HOW THE TECHNOLOGY IS WORKING

Testing was disrupted in the Smarter Balanced states of Nevada, Montana and North Dakota because of technical issues associated with open-source software.

In Nevada, states officials notified vendors they were in breach of contract. "Right now we have postponed the test until the vendor delivers a 'cure,'" Clark County Superintendent Pat Skorkowsky told parents. "I cannot say for certain whether that 'cure' will happen and if we can complete the assessments."

In Montana, State Superintendent Denise Juneau said she's been "very disappointed" by the technology problems which initially caused a two-week delay in testing followed by other technical issues, and she's decided to make the testing optional. She said a vast majority of districts are still doing the testing. She said she likes the rigor of the Smarter Balanced test, but will have to reconsider the state's testing options if the technology problems don't get resolved.

Beyond those problems, things are going relatively well operationally, especially considering the large-scale changes, Domaleski said.

In Ohio, for example, there was a problem early on with students taking

the PARCC test being directly taken to the end of the test if they hit the wrong key, but the problem was identified and fixed, said an Ohio Department of Education spokesman.

In California, where 3.2 million students are taking the Smarter Balanced test, testing has been running fairly smoothly, said Pam Slater, a spokeswoman for the California Department of Education.

## PARENTS ARE OPTING THEIR KIDS OUT

There's been mounting concern that students take too many standardized tests. Thousands have opted to keep their students from taking standardized tests.

In New York, some superintendents have reported that 60 percent or even 70 percent of their students are refusing to sit for exams. In New Jersey, state officials said preliminary estimates show that nearly 15 percent of parents of high school juniors opted their teens out, although fewer students in the younger grades opted out. Such resistance has also been reported in Maine, New Mexico, Oregon and Pennsylvania.

Under federal law, 95 percent of a state's students are required to undergo an annual assessment. As the opt-outs potentially put some states at risk of not meeting that threshold, Education Secretary Arne Duncan told reporters the federal government has "an obligation to step in."

## WHAT ELSE HAS GONE ON?

In New Jersey, the state education department said it will do a review to make sure that privacy is not compromised by a standardized-testing firm that is monitoring social media for security breaches. That announcement came after a school superintendent said her district was

contacted after a student tweeted something online about testing.

## WHAT'S AHEAD

Smarter Balanced said it plans to announce scores this summer. PARCC said it won't make available how students did until this fall, in part because this summer it will set its performance standards. Some schools are already telling parents that students' scores could be lower than on the tests they replaced.

Edward Ferrario, principal of Stony Lane Elementary School in North Kingstown, Rhode Island, said he and teachers in his building wonder if the Common Core standards they are teaching truly align to the new PARCC test and where the gaps are. He said his school has been commended in the past for its high-performing students, but that it's unclear how students are performing on the PARCC test, causing concern.

"That doesn't mean we're not going to be able to raise the bar," Ferrario said. "We'll have to."

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