

Parent Academy for Student Success (PASS)

Myths and Facts: Assessment and PARCC*

Parent Academy for Student Success #2
Measure What Matters: Assessing Student Learning and PARCC

Common Core State Standards (CCSS) outline what all students should know and be able to do in English language arts, reading, and mathematics from kindergarten through 12th grade. The CCSS have replaced the outdated Core Curriculum Content Standards for mathematics and English language arts. 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 Common Core State Standards, the state requires all students to take an annual assessment. For the 2014-2015 school year, 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 Common Core State 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 individual and groups of students.

As New Jersey and other states across the nation prepare to implement 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.

Some concerns about the PARCC assessments include secondary issues. Those issues are equally important and are under consideration. For purposes of the Parent Academy for Student Success (PASS) this Myths & Facts document will focus only on direct student impact.

The conversations about PARCC are engaging and vital to the improvement of our education system, however, some communication can lead to occasional misunderstanding of the facts. The following Myths & Facts provide information to clarify misconceptions about PARCC and its implementation in New Jersey.

* This document is intended to compliment 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/. 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/.

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 school year PARCC is the annual state assessment for students in New Jersey public schools. The new computer-based tests will replace 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 outdated student learning standards have been updated and are called the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The PARCC tests measure a student's understanding and ability to demonstrate their knowledge and skills of the CCSS. 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.

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 has used lessons learned from field tests to ensure that the tests, which will be administered to students in the 2014–15 school year, are the best possible assessments. Through field testing, researchers and teams of educators from the states have and will continue to examine the accessibility and fairness of test questions, 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, how performance on the computer-based version compares to the paper-based version, and more.

The 2014-2015 school year is the first year of implementation, and the administration and student participation will continue to offer learning opportunities that can impact the tests in the future.

A summary of New Jersey Lessons Learned from field tests are located: http://www.state.nj.us/education/assessment/memos/120214PARCCLessonslearned.pdf

Myth: The 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 State Standards (CCSS). 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 items for the assessment. Input from our educators is a key part of implementing the CCSS and the PARCC assessments that measure student learning to prepare all students for success in their futures.

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, provide 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 for them to enter college or the workforce and find they aren't able to do what is expected. Many students must accept unpaid internships in order to learn trade skills for direct employment and 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 must 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 CCSS 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 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 distributers. 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. The district develops its own testing schedules. Parent and public 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 assessment results are used in a meaningful way and action steps can 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 government 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 the level of quality for each school in the state.
 - 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' 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 comes directly from the local school budget.

Myth: PARCC tests will require advanced technology that schools don't have and can't 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 object to the fact that the tests will be administered with a computer rather than with paper and a No. 2 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, 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.

Recognizing that some students, parents, or educators may not be comfortable with a computer-based assessment, schools can offer student tutorials, provided by PARCC, so that they can become familiar with the technology expected on the days of the exams.

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 aren't 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 their future, teachers and students need high-quality data, tools, and resources to support, teaching, student learning, assessment, and success in the future.

Fact: PARCC can improve teaching and learning by supporting the core competencies outlined in the Common Core State Standards. The CCSS provides 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 like in the past assessments.

Myth: Individual students don't benefit from taking the PARCC tests.

Fact: A belief has surfaced indicating that the CCSS and PARCC only affect individual students while they are in K-12 schools; that belief is far from accurate. PARCC tests are designed to more thoroughly measure students' understanding of English language arts and mathematics than did previous tests. By administering the tests online, within weeks rather than months, an individual report is expected to be created for each student who takes the PARCC exams. That report will provide details on how each student performed on specific test items and will share with parents and school officials each student's strengths, weaknesses, and any need for additional supports or opportunities. (New Jersey will not provide access to individual student-level data to anyone other than parents and the school. Protections to prevent student-identifiable data from being released, marketed or distributed are in place at both the state and federal levels. Strategies are under continual development to proactively protect student-identifiable information.)

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.
- 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.
 - O 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 answer. 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. Like the Common Core State Standards, 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 perspective 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 - the Common Core Content Standards - nor did it include the type 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 from 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: Teaching-to-the-test is an educational phrase that has, in the public's eye, become synonymous with poor teaching. While not necessarily poor teaching, the term teach-to-the-test describes an instructional practice strictly limiting students' exposure to items on a test. The only goal of teaching-to-the-test is to train students to score high marks on a specific test. This type of teaching includes excessive repetition of simple, isolated facts and skills, and prevents students from gaining a holistic understanding of the subject matter.

Tests prior to PARCC required students to choose one answer from a multiple-choice list, select a true/false answer linked to a statement, and recite facts from memorization. Teaching-to-the-test could benefit students taking those types of tests.

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 Common Core State Standards. Because PARCC is completely aligned with the Common Core State 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: The CCSS and PARCC are 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 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, the CCSS and 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 are set for all students and annual standardized tests in math and English language arts are given to all students in grades three through eleven. Setting common and high academic standards (CCSS) 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: Administering the PARCC tests "will worsen the achievement and gender gaps."

Fact: After considering the myth of standardized teaching and learning, one can see how the reverse of this statement is true; among many factors, the unfortunate results of non-standardized teaching and assessing are widening achievement and opportunity gaps.

Recently some public statements about the PARCC tests have promoted the idea that by taking the PARCC tests certain groups of students will not have opportunities to achieve success. The stated rationale for the comment was: "Both the achievement and gender gaps in educational performance are largely due to motivational issues..."; and "...these tests and the curricula and pedagogical strategies tied to them are extremely demotivating. They create new expectations and new hurdles that will widen existing gaps, not close them."

The updates to NJ's teaching, learning, and assessment program do not discourage students, but rather, provide them with hope, pride and a world of possibilities. Learning with the CCSS and measuring student knowledge and skills with PARCC will ensure that all students in all learning subgroups have new opportunities to engage at a more exciting level of learning, with technology tools that they enjoy and utilize on a regular basis.

The department asks all stakeholders to: Never underestimate any child's motivation or ability to learn at high levels.

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

Fact: Instruction for all New Jersey students is based on the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The PARCC assessments were developed to assess how well students are learning the CCSS. Students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) or 504 plans receive instruction aligned with the CCSS. 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 provide 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. 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: All New Jersey parents can request that their children not participate in the PARCC exams.

Fact: The state's guidance and requirements regarding student participation in annual statewide assessments has not changed. Neither federal nor state law provides parents with an option regarding participation in required tests. Schools that don't meet federal and state requirements could face implementation of a corrective action plan and possibly risk loss of federal funding. Local districts apply their local policies on how they will work with parents and students on the required assessment. Local Superintendents and Boards of Education have specific information on the testing program in their district and schools.

PASS 2 documents and partnership supports are intended to compliment information about the New Jersey Department of Education's Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career (PARCC) Assessments and provide resources, materials, and opportunities for parents and educators to work together in the best interest of New Jersey students.