

K–12 Content Standards, Assessment and Accountability in California: A Short Primer for Higher Education

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To address the discrepancy between students' K–12 academic preparation and the demands of postsecondary schooling, several states, including California, implemented major curricular changes and corresponding assessments beginning in the 2010s. In California, the two-pronged approach includes the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC). The Common Core State Standards were adopted by the legislature in 2010, replacing the previous California State Standards. The aligned Smarter Balanced Assessments in English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics were implemented beginning in 2014–15.

Common Core State Standards

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) articulate what students in grades K–12 are expected to know and understand by the time they graduate from high school. The CCSS were developed by the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association with the goal of ensuring that high school graduates were prepared for college and beyond. K–12 teachers, as well as members of the higher education community, played a critical role in the development of these standards throughout the drafting process.ⁱ Nearly 10,000 comments were received on the standards during public comment periods, of which teachers were also a part.

While California's new CCSS are similar in scope to the previous California State Standards, they are substantially more rigorous (as has been documented in independent reviews).ⁱⁱ For example, **the CCSS require a deeper understanding than the earlier standards, with greater integration across subjects.** In terms of math, the CCSS promote a deeper understanding of mathematical concepts and the use of skills to solve practical problems.ⁱⁱⁱ This shift towards increased rigor is also echoed in the standards for ELA, where the CCSS stress reading and understanding informational texts, whereas the prior standards put a greater emphasis on literature. Additionally, the new standards set requirements for literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects in addition to ELA. Literacy standards for Grade 6 and above are based on the expectation that teachers of ELA, history/social studies, science and technical subjects will use their expertise to help students meet the particular challenges of reading, writing, speaking, listening and language in these content areas.^{iv}

Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium

Along with the new standards, **states across the country joined forces to develop new standardized assessments that more accurately reflected these rigorous college and career readiness standards.** In 2011, California joined the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC), one of two multi-state consortia developing assessments in alignment with the Common Core State Standards.^v To facilitate the transition to the new standards and assessments, the California legislature eliminated the prior assessment—the California Standards Tests—for most grades and subjects in 2013.^{vi} The content specifications for the tests were driven by committees of experts in research, policy, and practice to ensure that the tests cover the range of knowledge and skills in the Common Core State Standards.

The summative assessments are the cornerstone of the SBAC assessment system, though SBAC consists of multiple parts including teacher resources and formative assessments.^{vii} The summative assessments are comprehensive, end-of-year tests of grade-level learning in ELA and mathematics intended to measure students' progress towards college and career readiness. The summative assessments for ELA and math are administered in Grades 3–8 and 11, with some exceptions.^{viii} **The summative assessment is comprised of two required components: a computer adaptive test and a performance task.**^{ix} The computer-adaptive portion of the test is designed to match the ability of the student taking the exam by adapting the difficulty of the questions based on responses to previous test items. Conversely, the performance task is non-adaptive and involves interaction with stimulus materials (e.g., readings, video clips, data) or engagement in a problem solution, ultimately leading to an exhibition of the students' application of knowledge and skills, often in writing.

After students take the Smarter Balanced Assessment, their results for ELA and math are included in a Student Score Report.^x As the SBAC is criterion-referenced, with a scale that is linked across grade levels, **a student's score can be used to illustrate both the current level of achievement, as well as growth over time.** Student scale scores are categorized into four Achievement levels: *1-Standard Not Met*; *2-Standard Nearly Met*; *3-Standard Met*; and *4-Standard Exceeded*. **The Smarter Balanced Assessment is also used to gauge high school students' readiness for college-level coursework in English and math through the Early Assessment Program (EAP).** Specifically, for 11th graders, the Smarter Balanced Assessment performance levels align with one of four readiness categories, known as the EAP status: *Ready*, *Conditionally Ready*, *Not Yet Ready*, and *Not Ready*. These readiness levels, included on the Student Score Report, are then used by the California State University (CSU) and participating California Community Colleges (CCCs) to determine placement after admission. Students who demonstrate performance at the Ready level may be exempt from additional placement exams and remedial coursework. Moreover, students deemed *Conditionally Ready* may take approved courses in English and/or math during their senior year, which, upon successful completion, permits them to bypass additional placement requirements and remedial coursework prior to matriculation.^{xi}

School Accountability

Students' performance on the Smarter Balanced Assessment also plays a role in the California School Dashboard, California's school accountability system. When aggregated, Smarter Balanced Assessment scale scores describe school- or district-level average performance, changes in average performance from one year to the next, and gaps in achievement among subgroups of students. In addition to student performance on the Smarter Balanced Assessment, the California School Dashboard incorporates numerous indicators—suspension rates, high school graduation rates, college/career preparedness, progress of English learners towards English proficiency, and chronic absence rates—for which school-level performance is measured through a combination of current performance and change over time.

Importantly, the College/Career Indicator (CCI) included in the California School Dashboard is the primary indicator of school quality in college preparation for high schools. The CCI has three performance levels: *Prepared*, *Approaching Prepared*, and *Not Prepared*. Performance on the CCI is determined at the school-level based on the proportion of students deemed to be *Prepared* for college and career, which is in turn based on their 11th grade ELA and math Smarter Balanced Assessment scores, Career Technical Education pathway completion, Leadership/Military Science course completion, Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) exams, dual enrollment, A-G course completion, or attainment of the State Seal of Biliteracy.

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- i The National Education Association (NEA), American Federation of Teachers (AFT), National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM), and National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), among other organizations, brought teachers together to provide specific, constructive feedback on the Common Core standards. Additionally, teachers were members of teams that states convened to provide regular feedback on drafts. For more information on the development process, including a timeline, see: <http://www.corestandards.org/about-the-standards/development-process>.
 - ii Schmidt, W. H., & Houang, R. T. (2012). Curricular coherence and the common core state standards for mathematics. *Educational Researcher*, 41(8), 294–308.
 - iii To view the standards for ELA, see: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/documents/finalelaccsstandards.pdf>. To view the standards for math, see: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/documents/ccssmathstandardaug2013.pdf>.
 - iv It is of note that literacy standards in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects for Grades 6–12 are not meant to replace content standards in those areas but to supplement them.
 - v The other multi-state consortium developing a CCSS-aligned assessment was The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC).
 - vi Assembly Bill 484 (Chapter 489, Statutes of 2013, by Assembly member Bonilla).
 - vii There are three main components of the Smarter Balanced system: (1) an online library of formative assessments for use by teachers; (2) interim assessments for use by schools and/or districts to monitor student progress towards meeting standards; and (3) a summative assessment administered annually statewide to determine students' progress towards college and career readiness in English Language Arts (ELA)/literacy and math (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/sa>).
 - viii Students with disabilities who participate in the alternate assessments and English learners who are in their first 12 months of attending a school in the United States are not required to participate.
 - ix <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/tg/sa/sbacsummative.asp>
 - x For a sample of the report students receive, see: <http://testscoreguide.org/ca/sample>.
 - xi For more information on the EAP, see: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/gs/hs/eapindex.asp>.