FAQs
PARCC Assessment
April 2015, ISBE Division of Public Information

General Testing Questions

1. **Q:** What does a standardized test mean and why do students need a standardized test?

   **A:** A standardized test is a test in which the content and format of the test and the conditions of testing (such as timing, directions, use of calculators) are controlled to make them the same for all test takers. (Exceptions may be made for test takers with special needs.) Standardized tests create a means by which the relative performance of individual students and/or groups of students may be compared. These comparisons may be useful for assisting schools and districts in directing their resources effectively to ensure that all students are able to achieve the standards.

2. **Q:** What federal and state laws require this test and why?

   **A:** The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), also known as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, requires testing of all students. Key among its goals was to ensure that all students have access to a quality education and that we openly track how all students are faring in public schools. Prior to NCLB, states didn't track all students, particularly those with special needs or students of color. We now have 12 years of data on how well students in poverty, students of color and students with disabilities are faring in schools in Illinois and around the country. We know we must continue to improve and narrow the achievement gap for students in many schools.

3. **Q:** Districts like Chicago Public Schools District 299 must use assessments to measure growth for teacher evaluations under state legislation. How can they balance those large-scale assessments, such as Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) testing, with the addition of the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessments?

   **A:** Districts can choose from three types of assessments for new teacher evaluations and they do so after forming a joint committee with teachers or union representatives. Under this new evaluation system, standardized test results do not determine a teacher's future in Illinois as student growth is only a portion of an
educator’s evaluation rating. Districts may choose between national, state and locally developed assessments and must use at least two types of assessments.

It’s important to recognize that one assessment may not be able to meet all needs. The NWEA MAP assessment is typically administered as an interim assessment whereas the PARCC assessment is a summative assessment, measuring student learning and academic achievement at/near the conclusion of the school year. Both may serve a distinct purpose in a balanced assessment system. Beyond the state-required assessments, it is up to each district to determine which assessments best serve their needs related to guiding instruction and providing useful data for teacher evaluation.

4. Q: What is the difference between NWEA MAP and PARCC?

A: PARCC was built from the ground up to be aligned to the new Illinois Learning Standards as a summative assessment. NWEA MAP has served schools for a number of years as a benchmarking/interim assessment.

Pre-PARCC Preparation

5. Q: Should there have been a longer phase-in process for PARCC? How did you prepare districts for this test?

A: Illinois took several steps in recent years to phase in the new assessment requirements. In 2010, Illinois adopted the new Illinois Learning Standards in English language arts and mathematics that address the knowledge and skills students must demonstrate in order to be successful in college and careers. ISBE supported school districts as they implemented the new standards beginning in 2011. Districts were expected to fully implement curriculum and classroom instruction to meet these standards during the 2013-14 school year. During the spring of 2013, about 20 percent of the questions on the Illinois Standards Achievement Tests (ISATs), given to students in grades 3-8, were written to meet the more rigorous benchmarks of the new standards. In spring 2014, students in grades 3-8 took ISATs that were 100 percent aligned to the new benchmarks. PARCC assessments are also fully aligned to these standards, with the added benefit of results that can be compared directly with peers in other PARCC states.

Additionally, Illinois conducted a robust field-testing of the PARCC assessments, with about 110,000 students in 500 districts and 1,200 schools participating in the spring of 2014. ISBE hosted more than 50 webinars attended by roughly 12,000 educators over the past two years as they prepared to implement the new examinations. Technology surveys and infrastructure trials were conducted prior to testing to help schools determine if they could administer the test on computer, paper or a blend of both. We are now nearly finished with the first statewide testing window and there have been minimal implementation issues.
6. Q: Is the PARCC translated into other languages?

A: PARCC practice tests are being translated into Spanish. To check the schedule of when practice tests will be available in Spanish, go to http://www.parcconline.org/schedule-accommodated-practice-tests.

7. Q: Was the test field-tested in Spanish or any other languages?

A: The PARCC assessments were field-tested in the English language only.

8. Q: How can we address the issue of test anxiety felt by children taking the PARCC?

A: The PARCC assessments are designed to mirror the activities and instruction in the classroom. The test itself should not provoke undue anxiety. However, the manner in which the test is presented to students can affect their perception of the test as being “high stakes.”

It is normal for students to experience some degree of stress and anxiety before and during standardized tests. Students often internalize the emotions presented by adults. If a teacher or parent is anxious, then the child can become anxious as well. It is important for adults to be aware of the emotions they are displaying before and during standardized tests.

It is also important that students and school personnel understand that the new assessment will allow for a measure of growth over time rather than a single measure of achievement as has been reported in the past.

9. Q: Does the PARCC assessment measure what it claims to measure? In other words, has the test been validated?

A: The PARCC assessments are designed to measure the academic standards in the English language arts/literacy and mathematics Common Core State Standards. The standards are the constructs that identify what students should be taught and learn at each grade level so that by the time they graduate from high school they have the reading, writing and mathematical knowledge and skills needed to succeed in college and/or jobs with career potential.

The PARCC states adopted principles of evidence-centered design to ensure the PARCC tests have construct validity. Evidence-centered design principles required the PARCC states to identify the standards to be measured. Then it required the development of evidence statements, which describe the types of performance students must demonstrate to show they have met the standards. The test questions and tasks were developed to produce the evidences called for by the evidence statements. Then PARCC states worked with hundreds of state content experts and local educators for multiple reviews of every PARCC test question prior to field-testing in spring 2014 to confirm the likelihood that they would elicit answers that produce the expected evidence. Finally, reviewers checked again
after field-testing to see if the test questions and tasks adequately generated the desired performances.

PARCC 101

10. Q: Some community members have expressed concern about the amount of money spent on the PARCC. Was the contract with Pearson fairly and competitively bid, and can the state choose a different vendor in the future if Pearson fails to deliver a high-quality testing experience?

A: The costs for assessments in Illinois are paid for using a combination of federal and state funding. As more students take assessments online, costs will be significantly reduced; thus we encourage, but don’t require, the use of technology with assessment. There are multiple vendors involved with the development and administration of PARCC assessments and all the work was competitively bid, including the work being completed by Pearson. If any vendor fails to deliver on a product, it should be held accountable and all work rebid. Federal grant funds were used in the initial development of PARCC assessments, thus reducing individual state costs significantly. Additionally, there is a savings when states share assessment costs, such as with development of test items.

11. Q: How is PARCC useful for parents?

A: Assessment is a critical part of learning and it’s a vital part of all instruction. The PARCC assessment is the only state assessment that measures learning according to new, more rigorous Illinois Learning Standards in English and math that were adopted in 2010.

If you don’t assess students, you don’t know if they’re performing to these new higher standards. These are internationally benchmarked standards and they were written by educators across the country. You want to make sure all students are meeting high standards.

PARCC gives an earlier indicator of whether or not students are prepared for the rigors of college. We have only a quarter of students meeting all four of the ACT’s college readiness benchmarks. Twenty to 50 percent of students must take remedial courses when they get to college. That’s a waste of time and money.

12. Q: How can districts cut down on the number of tests they give students?

A: ISBE provided an assessment inventory tool this past November to help district teams take stock of their assessments and assessment strategy from a student perspective. The tool supports districts as they evaluate assessments they administer to students and help determine the minimum amount of assessment information necessary for diagnostic, instructional and accountability purposes.

Ultimately, districts can use the tool to ensure that every assessment is of high quality; it provides information necessary for both districts and students.
The tool is freely available for download, and additional support has been provided to three pilot districts that worked intensely with the tool during spring 2015.

13. Q: How did you determine which schools or students took the test online and which took the test via pencil and paper?

A: Data regarding technology readiness was collected through a tool known as I-TRAX. Each district was asked to test a number of their students online. They were given the opportunity to appeal this decision if they felt that the tool misrepresented their readiness or if there were outstanding reasons why they could not test some or as many students as suggested online. ISBE then offered an additional second opportunity to switch testing modes prior to PARCC testing to alleviate concerns of those districts and schools that were anxious about their preparedness. These issues may have been related to specific device compatibility issues, scheduling of devices, or staffing and support issues.

14. Q: What is the testing time for the PARCC assessment?

A: The PARCC assessment will require slightly more testing time than the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) and the Prairie State Achievement Examination (PSAE).

The PARCC assessment is broken up into two parts: a Performance-Based-Assessment (PBA), which is given when about 75 percent of instruction is completed, and an End-of-Year (EOY) assessment, which is given when approximately 90 percent of instruction is complete. The two parts are added together to result in one score. This summative assessment is not meant to measure progress from one portion to the next, but rather demonstrate whether or not students have learned the content provided and whether they are deemed proficient on the measured standards. The approximate total of 8 to 10 hours of PARCC testing is spaced out over several sessions in two parts to allow more time for scoring the extended tasks and writing portion of the PBA. Most students finished earlier than the allotted time during the trial run in the spring of 2014 and ISBE received similar anecdotal reports during the PARCC PBA sessions this spring.

15. Q: ISBE says that the PARCC accounts for less than 1 percent of a student’s instructional year. How did you reach that conclusion?

A: The average number of attendance days in Illinois public schools is 174.60 (rounded to 175 attendance days). The average instructional day length is 353 minutes, or 5 hours 53 minutes, for a total of 61,775 minutes per year. If you divide the maximum allotted (not estimated time on task) PARCC testing time of 600 minutes by 61,755, the result is .009712666936463 or 0.97 percent.
16. Q: How did the initial administration of the PARCC PBA go? Have there been any issues with implementation during the first testing sessions?

A: Smoothly. Most issues were quickly resolved. ISBE staff members were on hand throughout administration to answer questions by phone; webinars continued to be held on a regular basis; and updates were sent via email. More than 1.4 million tests have been completed online in Illinois as of early April.

During testing, the most prevalent issues were students receiving multiple seal codes at one time and entering test units early; students accidentally submitting tests early and needing to gain re-entry into the test; and accommodations or accessibility options not being initially entered on the testing platform.

PARCC RESULTS AND NEXT STEPS

17. Q: When will students’ results be available to families, educators and administrators?

A: This year is the first full administration of the PARCC assessments and is considered a baseline year for test results. As with any new test, educators must determine proficiency levels of the test. This is a time-consuming process that requires much care and consideration. Therefore, for this year only, scores will not be available immediately. It is estimated that scores will be returned to schools in the late fall. In subsequent years, data will be available more quickly. The Performance-Based Assessment contains human- and machine-scored items and is administered first because it requires additional time to score. The second portion of the test, End-of-Year, is mostly machine-scored and is administered later because it takes less time to score. Both portions of the test are required for a student to receive a score.

18. Q: What specifically will the PARCC results tell me?

A: PARCC aims to develop more detailed individualized student reports for parents than any previous state test. It will include information such as:

- How a student performed on each portion of the PARCC assessment, not just their overall score.
- How a student is doing compared to others in his/her class, school or district.
- How parents can help their student improve in areas where he/she is weakest.
- How a student performs in the context of college and career readiness.

19. Q: What are the consequences of PARCC testing this year?

A: This is a baseline year so there are no consequences for schools or students. The numbers will be used as a baseline in order to measure growth by students, schools and districts. The first year of data will also be used to establish cut scores that determine the performance levels at which students can be deemed “college and career ready.”
20. Q: How will the PARCC be used to improve instruction?

A: Because the assessment requires students to apply knowledge in answering questions related to the standards, by its nature it is influencing instruction. Any time we learn new material, it is important that we check our understanding and mastery of that material on a regular basis.

Assessment is a critical part of instruction. With the PARCC assessments, we are able to see very directly -- for the first time in Illinois history -- how our students compare to those in other PARCC states and against internationally benchmarked standards. The aim is to provide the best data possible to schools and districts for these purposes, though each district will have to decide how it uses the data internally for instructional improvement.

21. Q: Will PARCC be used for accountability purposes? Why can’t the test be given to a representative sample of students to determine school performance and growth?

A: For purposes of accountability, federal law prohibits the use of sampling. Once proficiency scores have been established, PARCC assessment results will be used to measure student growth for school and district accountability. ISBE does not dictate the measures a school should use to evaluate teacher effectiveness. This decision is made on a local level by the individual school districts.

PARCC and College Acceptance

22. Q: How will the PARCC assessment affect the administration of the ACT?

A: ISBE listened to districts that wanted the state to continue to fund and provide the ACT, so districts had the choice to administer the ACT Plus Writing and/or the WorkKeys®. All 11th-grade students within a given district took the ACT Plus Writing on March 3, 2015, if the district chose to offer the test. March 4 was set aside for the ACT WorkKeys® in participating districts. These tests were fully paid for by ISBE. Illinois is among a handful of states that has provided the ACT to all students, free of charge, for the past decade.

23. Q: Will ISBE continue to pay for the ACT?

A: Illinois’ contract with ACT has expired. ISBE has submitted a fiscal year 2016 budget request that includes a college admissions test. If funding is approved, we would then seek bids on a college admissions assessment.

24. Q. Why can’t my child simply take the ACT instead of the PARCC assessment?

A: We understand the utility of other standardized tests such as the ACT. The ACT is developed to adhere to its own college readiness standards, which differ from the Common Core standards in use by the other PARCC and Smarter Balanced
members. But PARCC is a different test. We believe PARCC is more comprehensive than our prior Illinois assessments, inviting students to think deeply and construct their own solutions to challenging tasks and situations. An assessment that requires students to analyze information – and explain their answers – better reflects classroom lessons and work experiences.

**25. Q: Can the PARCC assessment be used for college acceptance?**

**A:** PARCC assessment results can be used for the purpose of placement into college-level, credit-bearing courses in English language arts and some math classes. The PARCC assessments show readiness for college-level work and are not for the purpose of college acceptance.

The Illinois Council of Community College Presidents recently approved a policy to accept a performance level of 4 or 5 in math or English language arts on PARCC tests to place students directly into credit-bearing classes without requiring remediation. Institutions can also develop policies for math that allow a 3 on PARCC in combination with having passed a higher-level high school math class to qualify a student to enroll directly into credit-bearing math classes. The policy is available online at http://icsps.illinoisstate.edu/2015/03/illinois-council-of-community-college-presidents-response-to-parcc/.

**Opting Out**

**26. Q: Can a school or district request a waiver from the PARCC assessment?**

**A:** No, there is no waiver opportunity under federal law – specifically, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, also known as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001) – which requires states (including Illinois) receiving Title I funds to provide for administration of the state’s academic assessment to all designated students. In December 2014, the U.S. Department of Education confirmed Illinois’ interpretation of the ESEA’s requirements. (See www.isbe.net/assessment/pdfs/USED-ESEA-asmt-clarification-1214.pdf.) The department confirmed the requirements again in a February letter.

**27. Q: Can individual students opt out of the PARCC assessments? Can parents opt their children out of the PARCC assessments?**

**A:** No. Illinois does not have a policy that allows students to opt out of assessments, nor are parents allowed to opt their children out of tests. Districts are obligated to present each and every student with the opportunity to take the assessment. If a student refuses to test at the time the test is presented, the school district is required to account for this occurrence during the data correction period following testing.
28. Q: Why is ISBE opposed to legislation that calls for developing opt-out procedures?

A: A number of districts asked ISBE whether or not students may be “opted out” by their parents. As we have previously stated, there is no opt-out allowed under either state or federal law. Our interpretation of federal law has always been that any opt-out provision in state law would violate federal law. In order to get clarity on this latter issue, we requested an interpretation from the U.S. Department of Education and we received a response, confirming our interpretation, which is posted at http://www.isbe.net/assessment/pdfs/USED-ESEA-asmt-ltr-031315.pdf. A second letter from the department is posted at http://www.isbe.net/assessment/pdfs/USED-ESEA-asmt-ltr-031315.pdf.

The federal response confirms that districts must provide for the participation of all students on the assessment.

Additionally, ISBE does not believe that allowing opt-outs is a good policy for our students. Among our concerns over the opt-outs is that our parents, our districts and our state will not know how all of our students are performing, particularly those students who previously were not tested, including students with disabilities, English language learners, students in poverty and minority students. While we expect fidelity in testing at all districts, we know historically that has not always been the case. The state’s waiver from No Child Left Behind has at its core a goal to close achievement gaps. If students are opted out disproportionately, it may raise questions about whether or not those students’ educational needs are being met and whether districts are protecting the civil rights of their students.

Test Security

29. Q: What about reports that Pearson and PARCC are spying on students and stealing their private information?

A: One issue that has been more prevalent in other states is that students have compromised test security through social media posts. Our testing contractor, Pearson, uses a service similar to Google Alerts to scan social media for PARCC test items or copyrighted information. Then, only using the public information from social media, the service notifies us of a possible security breach. We then contact the district and request that the post be taken down. Phones are not allowed during testing. If this occurs, please remember it can be a teachable moment for all, demonstrating once again that what gets posted on social media can reach a much greater audience and have a much greater impact than intended. This has only occurred a few times in Illinois and your efforts to administer the test in accordance to our procedures are appreciated.
30. Q: Will students with disabilities and English learners (ELs) also take the PARCC assessment and, if so, what types of accommodations will the test allow?

A: Students with disabilities will take either the PARCC or the Dynamic Learning Maps (DLM-AA) assessment. The DLM-AA, which replaces the Illinois Alternate Assessment, is the test for the students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams determine which test will be most appropriate for individual students. The PARCC assessment includes a number of features to assist students with disabilities. A manual listing potential accommodations has been made available [here](https://parcc.illinois.gov) on the PARCC website. The manual addresses the specific needs of students with disabilities, English learners and English learners with disabilities.

ELs will take the PARCC and DLM-AA assessments using appropriate accommodations. Illinois will also continue to use ACCESS For ELLs®, a standards-based, criterion-referenced English language proficiency test designed to measure ELs' social and academic proficiency in English.

Other Metrics

31. Q: What other metrics can parents, educators and students look at to better understand their school, district and state performance and achievement?

A: Standardized tests are obviously just one tool among many that are useful in assessing the performance of students, schools and districts. The award-winning [Illinois Report Card](https://www.ccrbs.com) highlights a wide array of metrics that paint a fuller picture of achievement levels and growth. These include things such as graduation rates, dropout rates, postsecondary enrollment, student attendance, percentage of freshman-on-track, ACT scores and results from the 5Essentials Survey, along with numerous other useful measures.