**Speaker Prep: Anticipated Questions**

**We are moving away from fill-in-the-bubble tests!**

For years, most end of year tests were mainly multiple-choice exams that focused on basic skills. These tests did a poor job of measuring the skills students need for success after high school – like writing, critical thinking, and problem solving. With new education standards, states are working together to develop quality tests. In the 2014-2015 school year, schools replaced their old tests with new tests built to let parents and teachers know how well students are learning the skills and knowledge they need succeed in today’s world. Score reports will be released in the fall with release dates varying by state.

**Assessments**

**Why are the new tests required?**

States developed and implemented new standards to help students be better prepared for the next grade and eventually for college. Because we revised our standards, we need to have a test that accurately measures how our students are doing against these standards. Many states chose to develop their own or join one of two testing consortia – PARCC or Smarter Balanced. – Now, for the first time, there will be comparable student achievement results available from state to state. This is important so that we know that a high school diploma earned in Wisconsin means the same level of academic achievement as one earned in Nevada or Maryland.

**How do I know if my child progressed this year?**

This is a transition year, since this is a new test we are setting a new baseline for our students. It is important to understand that we cannot compare this year’s scores to last year because it is a different test. It would be like comparing apples to oranges. The old tests made sure that students were ready to proceed to the next grade level; the new ones ensure that they are on track for college and career readiness. The bar has been raised for students and the new tests are measuring more complex skills including critical-thinking, persuasive writing, and problem solving, which is different than previous tests.  A low score does not mean that your child did not improve or learned less. This first year’s scores set a new baseline from which progress will be measured moving forward.

**What if my child is doing well in the classroom and on his or her report card, but not on the test score?**

This test is only one of several measures that illustrate a child’s progress in math and English language arts. Report card grades can include multiple measures like participation, work habits, group projects and homework. These are not reflected on the assessment so you may see a discrepancy. These assessments are a tool to measure mastery of the grade level standards. Teachers and parents should use multiple sources of measurement to determine overall progress and identify gaps in learning that can be addressed.

**Why are parents receiving test scores after the end of the school year?**

This first year is a transition year. The writing section and performance task questions that require students to explain their reasoning need to be hand-scored which takes longer to complete. How quickly parent reports are available varies between states and individual districts. The goal for next year is to have scores available to teachers at the beginning of the school year so they have a clear understanding of each student’s strengths and areas for improvement.

**How will students’ scores be used?**

Scores will be used to identify where a child excels and can be challenged to go deeper into the subject matter, or where he or she needs extra support or practice. In some states, colleges and universities will use the Smarter Balanced grade 11 test scores to determine course placement. Each state decides how scores will be used and how scores will impact the state accountability plan.

**How will the score reports help identify gaps in learning?**

New assessment score reports are broken down by key achievement goals, giving parents and teachers a clear picture of a student’s areas of strength and weaknesses. Parents can work with their students at home and teachers can provide additional resources focused on strengthening the weaker areas.

**Are teachers teaching to the test?**

Absolutely not. Teachers create their lesson plans based on the learning objectives included in their state standards. Good instruction from your child’s teacher will prepare them for the test all year long.

**How long do the new tests take?**

The PARCC and Smarter Balanced assessments were designed with students in mind. The developers understand that third-grade students and eighth-grade students cannot sit for the same amount of time. The tests are broken up into sections that are age and developmentally appropriate.

**Does my school have adequate technology to conduct the new assessments?**

The biggest hurdle that some schools face is acquiring adequate technology and bandwidth to accommodate the new electronic testing. Assessments will be available in the traditional “paper and pencil” format for three years following implementation in the 2014-2015 school year. According to experts, an average middle school can successfully conduct electronic assessments with one lab containing 30 computers. Most likely, your child’s teachers have been taking them to your school’s computer lab to make sure they are comfortable with the technology that will be used on the tests. Regardless of whether students are using pen and paper or a computer-based format, they will be given scratch paper that will be collected at the end of the test and shredded. Students may ask for additional paper during the test.

**What if I don’t want my student to take the test? Can I opt out?**

Both federal and state law requires schools to test all students in certain grades and subjects. If a parent withdraws a student from the test, there could be consequences that affect the student moving on to the next grade or graduating. More importantly, test results give valuable information about student progress, their strengths and weaknesses, and where they need additional support. When students don’t take the test, we lost this valuable information.

**How are the scores calculated?**

There are guidelines for the open-ended questions that will be used as guides for scoring, and students can get partial credit. Both PARCC and Smarter Balanced developed scoring guidelines and sample answers to assist in the scoring of the writing and open-ended questions.

**State Standards**

**What are state standards? How are state standards different from curriculum?**

Standards are a set of guidelines for what students are expected to know and be able to do at specific points in their education. Standards provide the foundation for key components of the education system, including curricula, instructional materials, teacher training, and assessments. Our state adopted new rigorous standards in 2010 with the help of teachers, researchers and the community.

A curriculum is the course of study covering the standards. It is set by local school districts and includes the lesson plans, programs, and textbooks that teachers use to teach the content and skills outlined in the standards.

**What kind of data is the federal government compiling on my child through these new standards?**

None. In fact, federal law protects the privacy of student information and education records through the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Confusion over this likely stems from the National Education Data Model, which is a framework describing the types of data that individual school districts and states may choose to collect. But in fact, federal law prohibits the reporting of data that could identify individual students and the federal government does not have access to student-level information held in state or local databases.

**Are teachers being told how to run their classrooms?**

No. Teachers remain in control over what happens in the classroom and how they will get students to reach mastery through lesson planning. The standards actually gives teachers more flexibility in developing their lesson plans because it decreases the number of items being taught while increasing the depth of knowledge students receive. This is referred to “fewer, deeper” – fewer items, deeper mastery and understanding. Teachers still use the same process that their state or district requires for designing curriculum and selecting the learning materials including books and workbooks.

**Does the standards remove fiction and literature from schools? And why are science teachers instructing students in reading?**

First, the standards encourages English language arts to use a variety of texts in their instruction, including works of fiction, classic literature, and informative, non-fiction texts such as newspapers. The goal of the standards is to increase the reading availability to students as they progress through school so they are fully prepared for the complex and higher-level reading they will encounter in college and the workplace. Second, reading comprehension is required in all classes, not just English, so teachers of other subjects are encouraged to ensure that students’ reading comprehension is progressing on grade level.