



NEWS

CONNECTICUT STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

DR. DIANNA R. WENTZELL, COMMISSIONER

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STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION RELEASES NEW TEST SCORES

Scores Present a New Starting Point for Growth

Statewide Scores in English Language Arts Exceed Expectations, Match Expectations for Math

(HARTFORD, CT)—The Connecticut State Department of Education today released statewide scores for the new Smarter Balanced exams. With Connecticut’s record high graduation rates and best-in-the-nation National Assessment for Educational Progress scores in Grade 12, the state transitioned to new Common Core-aligned exams that presented a new, higher bar for students—with significantly tougher questions intended to test real-world skills.

States nationwide have done similar transitions to new, tougher tests, and as such, some of their local districts scores have dropped over 60 points.

Connecticut, with some of the top schools in the nation, made the same shift in order to set even higher expectations for children and continue the progress students have made over the past several years.

The results show that 55.4 percent of Grades 3–8 and 11 students are meeting or exceeding the achievement level in English language arts (ELA), which significantly exceeded expectations, and 39.1 percent of students are meeting or exceeding the achievement level in mathematics, which matched state officials’ expectations.

The scores were expected to look dramatically lower than previous test scores because of the alignment of the curricula, standards, and exams to higher-level thinking requisite for college and career success. States and districts around the nation that made the transition to the more rigorous standards are seeing more students meeting their college- and career-readiness benchmarks year-to-year. In Kentucky, the percentage of high school graduates meeting the state’s new accountability measure for college and career readiness has increased from 38 percent to 62 percent in just four years.

“We know that when we set high expectations for children, they always meet them. It’s our job to set the bar high. And when we’ve reached our goals, it’s incumbent upon us to raise the bar again. Graduation rates in our state are at record highs, and we’re preparing our kids for college and careers like never before in Connecticut. Yet, we can always do more—and that’s why we have set a new

baseline from which to grow,” Governor Dannel P. Malloy said. “We have a crisis in education in America, and it’s because for too long expectations were too low. Now, we have a laser-focus on preparing children with the skills they need for college and beyond—the real workforce skills and critical-thinking abilities that students will need for the rest of their lives. That’s why we’re at this important transition point and that’s why we’ve set this new baseline upon which to measure ourselves.”

With the expectation that scores would drop, the SDE anticipated that statewide results would largely mirror performance on the 2012–13 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), nationwide exams considered by some to be the gold-standard for testing. There are also myriad highlights and bright spots in the scores:

- Connecticut’s results show that this year’s English language arts results beat expectations significantly. In Grade 4, 43 percent of students met the 2013 NAEP reading proficiency standard, whereas 55 percent of fourth-graders met or exceeded the achievement level in ELA on the 2015 Smarter Balanced exam. In Grade 8, 45 percent of students met the 2013 NAEP reading proficiency standard, whereas 54 percent of eighth-graders met or exceeded the achievement level in ELA on the 2015 Smarter Balanced exam.
- The performance of the state’s youngest readers emerged as a bright spot in the 2015 statewide Smarter Balanced results. More third- and fourth-graders, 29.7 percent and 30.7 percent, respectively, performed within the top level, “Level 4: Exceeds the achievement level,” than performed within any of the other three individual levels.

“These results reveal that our students have learned many of the things they need to know and be able to do. And we see that they haven’t learned some things, yet. As leaders, teachers and parents examine our baseline results, it is very important to remember that not having learned something yet is feedback for future growth,” said Education Commissioner Dr. Dianna R. Wentzell. “These results do not mean that our students are learning less, rather it reflects that we raised the bar. We are confident that our students will continue to build upon the new baseline they set this year and will rise to meet the challenge of the more rigorous material, as they always do.”

Two Alliance District high schools emerged as bright spots of the 2015 Smarter Balanced administration. As schools accelerated into the higher, more rigorous material, Bloomfield High School and New London High School continued to build upon their school improvements and exited their status as turnaround schools, which represent the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools in the state.

“Connecticut has delivered strong results in reading compared to other states in the nation,” said Commissioner Wentzell. “We are pleased to see that our students exceeded our preliminary estimates in English language arts and we look forward to seeing them continue to grow stronger in this area.”

In 2015, the Smarter Balanced tests replaced the old state tests, the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT) and Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT) in both ELA and math for students in Grades 3–8 and 11 statewide. In total, approximately 267,000 students took the Smarter Balanced exams in 2015, the first operational year of the new state assessments. In 2014, about 90 percent of school districts administered the Smarter Balanced field test in lieu of the CMT and CAPT tests.

Students are still administered the CMT Science in Grades 5 and 8 and the CAPT Science in Grade 10, in compliance with federal and state law. Compared to last year, each grade dipped slightly compared to 2014. In Grade 5, 79 percent of students performed at Proficient, while 56 percent of students performed at Goal. In Grade 8, 77 percent of students performed at Proficient, while 61 percent of students performed at Goal. In Grade 10, 78 percent of students performed at Proficient, while 45 percent of students performed at Goal.

Math scores matched the state's estimates. Nonetheless, as a starting point to spearhead the state's efforts to improve supports in math, Commissioner Wentzell announced that she will convene educators, industry and business leaders, and experts in math and STEM instruction on a Commissioner's Council on Mathematics. This group will be charged with identifying best practices, both in Connecticut and across the nation, and to explore promising innovations in the areas of math and science instruction.

Secondly, the SDE plans to intensify supports to math teachers. The new academic standards, the Connecticut Core Standards, represent a significant shift in what students should know and be able to do in the subject. To date, the SDE has sponsored training for thousands of Connecticut educators. In the coming year, the SDE will continue to offer quality professional development opportunities for educators who teach math. In addition, the SDE will explore other, innovative professional learning opportunities to strengthen supports for Connecticut's math educators.

Commissioner Wentzell continued: "Nationally, Connecticut has generally been middle of the pack when it comes to math. These scores match our anticipated results. However, we have room to grow and more to do."

"Math is clearly an area we have significant room for improvement in Connecticut. Another area in need of continued focus and effort is in regard to our chronic achievement gaps," said Commissioner Wentzell.

Further analysis of the 2015 Smarter Balanced results reveals achievement gaps among high-need students' performance when compared to their peers—ones that must be closed. The high-needs group represents a super subgroup of all low-income students, English learners (ELs), and students with disabilities (SWD) in Connecticut. A high concentration of high-needs students attends schools in Alliance Districts.

Of all the high-needs students in Connecticut, only 30.6 percent are meeting or exceeding the achievement standards (Level 3) in ELA, whereas 74.9 percent of all their non-high-need peers are meeting or exceeding the achievement standard in ELA. In math, only 16.4 percent of high-needs students statewide are meeting or exceeding the achievement standards (Level 3), whereas 57 percent of all their non-high-need peers are meeting or exceeding the achievement standard.

The Alliance District program is the state's lead initiative to improve student success in the state's 30 most chronically struggling school districts and to help close achievement gaps. The program provides greater resources in exchange for greater accountability to ensure that students, who need the most help, get the assistance they need. Since its creation in 2012, the Alliance District program has invested a total of \$407 million in Connecticut's high-need school districts.

“We know that students have greater needs in our Alliance Districts, especially our larger urban districts. That’s why, in 2012, we began to provide greater resources, more support, and stronger accountability,” said Commissioner Wentzell. “This kind of transformational change will take time, but with continued support, we expect to see growth each year moving forward.”

The best way to support improvement in student performance is through rich, engaging instruction—not by practicing the Smarter Balanced exam. Proven intervention strategies will also benefit students who do not meet the achievement level (Level 1). To better support and strengthen districts’ implementation of quality intervention systems, the SDE will be refreshing the state’s guidelines for Scientific Research Based Interventions (SRBI), a proven tiered intervention system.

“We have to be honest about the disparities in our students’ achievement,” said Commissioner Wentzell. “Civil rights organizations fought hard to ensure that every kid would be counted in order to bring true transparency to our achievement gaps. By bringing this issue out into the sunlight, we are able to have the frank and honest conversations about our gaps.”

She continued: “Much like our annual physical where we track important health indicators, assessments are an important academic checkup. And just as we do not improve our health by practicing our physical exam, the best way to improve our results over this baseline year is not by practicing the Smarter Balanced exam. The only authentic way to improve our performance is to emphasize quality learning time and to personalize this instruction to address individual student needs.”

The Smarter Balanced assessments will help parents and teachers better understand how the student is progressing, revealing where the student is excelling, and where the student needs extra help. The new scores provide more realistic assessment of where each child stands in relation to where they should be. These new assessments provide useful and necessary information, but it is important to remember that it is only one piece of the puzzle. The results should be a starting point for discussion between parents and teachers about students’ individual learning plans.

Parents can expect their child’s individual scores when their district normally provides the parent reports. To help parents understand the new standards and accompanying state tests, the SDE created guides that explain what the student should have learned last year, what the student will learn in the year ahead, and how the parent can help the student learn at home. These brochures will be available in hardcopy at the local school district and accessible online at www.ct.gov/sde/parentguides.

Commissioner Wentzell cautioned: “It is critically important to know how well our students have learned the grade-level material. However, we must not lose sight that what matters more is how much growth each student attained toward this goal.”

“Just as our health profile is best improved by adjusting our daily decision-making about nutrition and physical activity, a student’s learning profile is best enhanced with daily experiences of rich, robust, relevant instruction,” said Commissioner Wentzell. “And to be clear, test preparation is not instruction. Every class period spent preparing for the state test, is time stolen from quality instruction. We owe it to our students to provide as much quality learning time as possible so that they continue to grow and thrive.”

Statewide, district and school results can be found online at www.ct.gov/sde/SettingtheBaseline2015.

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