



PARENTS' GUIDE TO NEW ASSESSMENTS IN ALABAMA

ACT Aspire is Alabama's new standards-based assessment system. Students in grades 3-8 began taking Aspire in spring 2014. By spring 2016, students in grades 3-8 and 10 were taking it.

The new assessments gauge how well students have mastered Alabama's academic standards—collectively called the Alabama College-and Career-Ready Standards (CCRS)—and ultimately how ready they are for the next grade and for college and careers after graduation. The ACT Aspire assessments are aligned with the goals of Alabama's two-year colleges and universities, as well as the business community.

WHY NEW ASSESSMENTS?

Teachers and principals talk a lot about assessments, which are used to measure students' academic achievement. This document highlights the end-of-year summative assessments, which judge (1) student progress toward mastering state standards and (2) program and school effectiveness. For other assessments used, see box at right.

THIS GUIDE INCLUDES:

- Overview of new assessments which measure student proficiency against more rigorous standards
- Sample assessment questions
- Overview of accountability for students, teachers and schools
- Additional resources for parents

Types of assessments

Classroom-based: Individual tests given by teachers as needed throughout the year to assess knowledge and skills in specific areas

Interim: The same test repeated at set intervals to measure student growth over time

Summative: End-of-year assessments administered by the state to measure student performance against a common set of standards

This document addresses summative assessments.



New summative assessments address longstanding concerns that parents, educators and employers have had about current state assessments—namely that they measure ability to memorize facts, rather than the skills to think critically and apply knowledge.

What is different about the new assessments?

The new assessments for English-language arts (ELA) and mathematics will enable educators to deepen their understanding of student progress from grade to grade—and just as importantly, identify any gaps in progress so they can address them **well before students enter college or the workforce**.

ELA assessments will demonstrate:

- Whether students can read and comprehend texts of varying complexities.
- How well students can integrate information across sources to make a persuasive argument.
- The degree to which students can use context to determine the meaning of academic vocabulary.

Mathematics assessments will demonstrate:

- Whether students understand and can use important math ideas, including number sense, algebraic thinking, geometry and data analysis.
- The extent to which students can use math facts and reasoning skills to solve real-world problems.
- How well students can make math arguments.

Benefits of New Assessments:

- Modular administration allows flexibility in scheduling testing across the entire four-week window.
- Students are assessed with selected response as well as constructed response items. Of course, the constructed response items do not always have just one answer.
- Schools and systems may test their students with computer-based or paper-pencil assessments. Many schools are choosing to test with a combination of computer-based and paper-pencil formats.
- The fact that ACT Aspire links to the ACT College- Career-Readiness Benchmarks and aligns with College- and Career-Ready Standards is the most attractive characteristic of this assessment.
- Teachers and parents want to know where their students are! With the ACT Aspire platform and customized reports, teachers and parents will be able to get detailed information about student progress toward specific learning standards. With that information, they will be able to tailor instruction and resources to increase growth.



College and career readiness defined:

The level of preparation a student needs to enroll and succeed—without remediation—in a credit-bearing course at a postsecondary institution that offers a baccalaureate degree or in a high-quality certificate program that enables students to enter a career pathway with potential future advancement.

Sample Questions by Grade Level

The following questions are representative of those found on the new assessments.

EXAMPLE OF A 4TH GRADE MATH QUESTION

Three classes at Lakeview School are going on a field trip. The table shows the number of people in each class, including the teacher.

They can choose to use buses, vans, and cars.



Buses have 20 seats



Vans have 16 seats



Cars have 5 seats

	Total number of people
Mrs. Ruiz's Class	23
Mr. Yang's Class	25
Mrs. Evans' Class	24

Which three combinations can be used to take all three classes on a field trip?

- 1 bus and 4 vans
- 3 vans and 11 cars
- 1 bus and 1 van and 6 cars
- 1 bus and 8 cars
- 2 buses and 3 vans and 4 cars

Submit Answer

EXAMPLE OF A 6TH GRADE ELA QUESTION

Students are asked to read a passage from the fictional text "Julie of the Wolves" by Jean C. George and answer the following:

SAMPLE ITEM

In the passage, the author developed a strong character named Miyax. Think about Miyax and the details the author used to create the character. The passage ends with Miyax waiting for the black wolf to look at her.

Write an original story to continue where the passage ended. In your story, be sure to use what you have learned about the character Miyax as you tell what happens to her next.

Answer:

EXAMPLE OF A 10TH GRADE ELA QUESTION

SAMPLE ITEM

Use what you have learned from reading "Daedalus and Icarus" by Ovid and "To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Triumph" by Anne Sexton to write an essay that provides an analysis of how Sexton transforms Daedalus and Icarus.

As a starting point, you may want to consider what is emphasized, absent, or different in the two texts, but feel free to develop your own focus for analysis.

Develop your essay by providing textual evidence from both texts. Be sure to follow the conventions of standard English.

Answer:

What Parents Can Expect

ACT Aspire assessments are designed to measure the new, more rigorous expectations of the state standards. Because the new tests measure complex skills, which are different from the skills measured by previous state tests, scores on these assessments will look lower. But students aren't doing worse—it's just that the bar is higher.

As students and teachers gain the skills and knowledge needed to meet the new higher standards, performance will also improve. In other states where more rigorous tests have been implemented, students improved their performance after the first year.

How will schools support students during the transition?

Schools have created a variety of models to assist students who are struggling with the standards. Remediation and summer courses, in-class adjustments based on ongoing in-class assessment results and pull-out tutoring are just a few support strategies. For example, Alabama has implemented an early warning system for student absences, behavioral issues and coursework issues. The state also supports student alternatives to traditional disciplinary actions. Parents should collaborate with teachers and administrators to develop additional plans as needed.

Although Alabama has high expectations for its students with the implementation of CCRS, changes are not expected overnight. The goals for student achievement are based on current academic assessments and are expected to be achieved gradually.

How will students, and teachers and schools be held accountable?

In 2012, the Alabama State Board of Education developed its "Plan 2020" with the vision of "Every Child a Graduate – Every Graduate Prepared" for college/work/adulthood in the 21st century. An accountability plan is included. The plan lists educational priorities, strategies and target goals for students, teachers and schools. Learn more about Plan 2020 at alsde.edu/sec/rd/Plan%202020/Alabama%20PLAN%202020.pdf



TAKE ACTION: Parents can work with school or district curriculum directors to learn about the new curriculum and understand how to support their children to minimize any dips in assessment scores.



Take Action

Parents are their child's best advocates. As a parent and your child's first teacher, you should be informed of the assessment and accountability system that is in place in your child's school. Parents and families must be at the table with school leaders and school districts to ensure that testing is implemented well and with enough resources to ensure success.

The Alabama State Department of Education should include parents and teachers in thoughtful conversations based on trust, collaboration and respect. For additional details about the state's assessment and accountability system, please call the Department at (334) 242-9950. Here are some questions you might want to ask:

- How many assessments does my child take this school year and where can I access/view the assessment calendar?
- What will happen if my child does not meet proficiency levels on the new assessments?
- How will the results of tests be used to support my child's learning?
- What can I do, as a parent, to help my child do his or her best?
- How will school evaluations be affected based on results of the new assessments?

Also, be sure to speak with your local school administrators! Ask them to host a parent night in the spring to explain the tests and in the fall to explain test results.

Below is the list of policies and practices that National PTA supports. Check with the Alabama Department of Education to determine if Alabama's policies and practices are closely aligned with those of the PTA.

- National PTA believes that valid assessment does not consist of only a single test score, and that at no time should a single test be considered the sole determinant of a student's academic or work future.
- National PTA supports nationally agreed upon voluntary standards if they are derived by consensus at the state and local levels. Parents must be involved in this process.
- National PTA believes that assessments provide valuable information to parents, teachers and school leaders about the growth and achievement of their students. Furthermore, having annual data on the performance of students can help inform teaching and learning as well as identify achievement gaps among groups of students within a school and among school districts. National PTA believes assessments are essential to ensure that all students receive a high-quality education.

Preparing and Supporting Your Child

- Review the testing calendar and work with your child's school to ensure there will be regular and clear communications from the school on the assessments, the results and how they are used.
- Discuss the new tests with your children. Make sure they feel comfortable and understand why they are taking a test.
- With older children, explain that the new assessments were created to make sure they are on track to succeed after graduation and to identify any issues early enough to give them more support.
- Explain to your child that the tests will initially be more challenging. Tell your child you have high expectations and you and the teachers are there to help every step of the way.
- Review test results with your child and his or her teacher.
- Make sure your child has a comfortable place for studying and is prepared mentally and physically for a test.

Staying informed and involved

- Become familiar with the CCRS and the new assessments by visiting: alsde.edu/ofc/osl/Pages/ccrsm-all.aspx and alabamagrit.org/resources
- Read all comments written by the teacher on classroom lessons and tests. Ask teachers to explain anything that is unclear and discuss how you can best work together to address areas of improvement for your child.
- Monitor your child's progress and regularly communicate with your child's teachers. If your child needs extra help or wants to learn more about a subject, work with his or her teacher to identify opportunities for tutoring, after-school clubs or other resources.
- Tests are not perfect measures of what a child can do—there are many other factors that might influence a test score. For example, a child can be affected by the way he or she is feeling on test day or the particular classroom setting.
- Meet with your child's teacher as often as possible to discuss progress. Ask for activities to do at home to help prepare for tests and improve your child's proficiency.

Additional resources

- Visit the Alabama Department of Education website: alsde.edu