



## With Common Core testing, you get what you pay for



Tim Shaffer/Microsoft via Getty Images

Students work on laptops at a school in Philadelphia.

by ***Amy Scott*** (</people/amy-scott>)

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**STORY**

Think “standardized test,” and you might picture kids sitting at their desks filling in bubbles with No. 2 pencils or a Scantron machine cranking out scores.

It’s time to update that picture. This spring, millions of kids around the country will take a whole new kind of computer-based test aligned to the Common Core state standards. They’ll be able to use online tools like highlighters and calculators. They’ll be asked to “drag and drop” their answers into boxes and to respond to video.

In [one sample \(http://screenreader.practice.parc.testnav.com/tests/grade-7/session-1/section-1-17.php\)](http://screenreader.practice.parc.testnav.com/tests/grade-7/session-1/section-1-17.php) from a 7<sup>th</sup>-grade English test, children read two articles about electricity, and then watch a [video clip \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5M3Dow2oKIM\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5M3Dow2oKIM) from a TED talk about building circuits with Playdough. Then they’re asked to write an essay, supporting their response with evidence from each source.

No bubbles in sight.

“Whether it’s the English test or math test, there’s a great emphasis on constructing responses to questions,” says Jeff Nellhaus, chief of assessment for [PARCC \(http://www.parcconline.org/\)](http://www.parcconline.org/).

That stands for the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers. It’s one of two multi-state consortia that shared \$360 million in federal grants to create tests aligned with the common core standards. The standards focus on critical thinking, problem solving and analytic skills. Nellhaus says the old measures won’t do.

In life, he says, there are no multiple-choice answers. “You have to construct your own answers from your own knowledge and drawing on other sources to get information,” Nellhaus says. “That’s what this test focuses on primarily.”

That kind of test is more expensive, says Scott Marion, associate director of the [National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment \(http://www.nciea.org/\)](http://www.nciea.org/). Each question has to be written, then reviewed for bias and age-appropriateness, and field tested. Then it may be revised or even thrown out. When you add up nine grade levels, all with different tests in math and English, we’re talking thousands and thousands of questions. Marion estimates a single multiple-choice question costs roughly \$1,000 to develop.

“When you get into more open-ended questions, you get into three, four, five thousand dollars per question,” he says.

That’s because it’s harder to write questions that demonstrate different levels of ability. They also have to be changed out every year or so. Those are just the development costs. Then there’s the scoring.

“Scoring open-response questions generally requires human beings to read the papers and then assign scores,” Marion says.

Humans need to be trained and monitored to make sure they’re scoring fairly. Under pressure from states, PARCC has tried to keep costs down through technology. A feature on the math tests lets students type in equations that can be scored by machine. There will still be some multiple choice. Nellhaus says PARCC is also testing technology to score essays by computer.

“We’ll always have humans doing a check on the machines,” he says, but computerized essay scoring could be incorporated in the tests within a few years.

The savings won’t come soon enough for states like Georgia, which withdrew from the consortium when PARCC estimated its tests would cost about three times what the state had been spending. PARCC’s price has since come down to about \$24 per student. That’s less than what many states spend, but much more than others. The cost has added to the controversy surrounding the new tests.

For some, though, it’s not enough.

“I think we’re spending actually too little on testing,” says Matthew Chingos, a senior fellow at the Brookings

Institution. “If we’re talking about 30 bucks a kid, to round up, that’s less than the cost of a textbook.”

A few years ago Chingos did a [rough estimate](#)

([http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/reports/2012/11/29%20cost%20of%20assessment%20chingos/11\\_assessment\\_chingos\\_final.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/reports/2012/11/29%20cost%20of%20assessment%20chingos/11_assessment_chingos_final.pdf)) of what states spend every year on K-12 assessment. He came up with about \$1.7 billion – out of more than \$600 billion in total spending on public education.

“We’re really talking about a small amount of money, especially in comparison to the importance that’s attached to the results of these tests, and the uses to which people want to put them, which is to hold teachers accountable, to improve schools, to hold schools accountable,” Chingos says.

There’s another reason tests are so important. They don’t just measure what kids learn. We’ve all heard the phrase “teaching to the test.” PARCC’s Nellhaus says tests send a signal to teachers and principals.

“What the test measures and how it measures it is going to have an impact on what they teach and how they teach it,” he says, “so it’s really incumbent on the test to be great.”

A great test? It’s hard to imagine students will see it that way when get a load of the real thing in the next few months.

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## Common Core By the Numbers

45

The number of states that have adopted the Common Core State Standards.

2009

The year the Common Core standards were developed.

10

The number of states that are giving standardized tests from the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), which are aligned with the Common Core standards.

\$23.97

The [per-student cost of PARCC exams](http://www.parcconline.org/cost) (<http://www.parcconline.org/cost>).

18

The number of states that will use Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) tests this spring.

**\$22.50 – \$27.30**

The [per-student costs of SBAC exams \(http://www.smarterbalanced.org/faq/7-what-does-it-cost-for-a-state-to-participate-in-smarter-balanced-assessment-consortium/\)](http://www.smarterbalanced.org/faq/7-what-does-it-cost-for-a-state-to-participate-in-smarter-balanced-assessment-consortium/).

**\$1.7 billion**

The Brookings Institution [estimated in 2012 \(http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2012/11/29-cost-of-ed-assessment-chingos\)](http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2012/11/29-cost-of-ed-assessment-chingos) that states spend \$1.7 billion on standardized tests each year. Brookings also noted the entire public education system [spends more than \\$600 billion annually \(http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/up-front/posts/2015/02/02-standardized-tests-chingos\)](http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/up-front/posts/2015/02/02-standardized-tests-chingos).

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### About the author

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**Jeff William Nichols** February 9, 2015

Two issues with this story: first, the reporter did not challenge the idea that Common Core tests are somehow magically going to accomplish what no standardized test has ever done before, or by definition can ever do: assess original, critical thinking. (How can you standardize assessment of responses you can't anticipate?)

Instead PARCC officials are quoted blandly claiming that these tests will assess deep, critical thinking, without explaining how. Anyone who believes this must read Todd Farley's devastating and hilarious expose of the testing industry, "Making the Grades: My Misadventures in the Standardized Testing Industry." It is the definitive inside scoop on the sausage factories that we are entrusting to judge our children's minds. I guarantee no one who reads this book will accept that Common Core tests are somehow going to be different. The book lays out with shocking clarity the arbitrary, shoddy processes by which the "open-ended items" that are supposed to assess our children's deepest thoughts are actually designed, administered and graded.

The other problem is the uncritical repetition of these same officials' cost estimates of the new tests. Are they including in their price tag of 25-odd dollars per child the vast investments in new technology devoted to online testing and the millions of teacher hours lost to test prep, test administration and grading etc.? If the tests are so cheap, why have thousands of schools been ruthlessly cutting arts, sciences, physical education, libraries and countless other programs and services to accommodate the ceaseless testing?

This report comes perilously close to the kind of article that rewords an official press release and calls it news. Until reporters start digging deeper than this, the public remains vulnerable to the horrendously misguided policies associated with No Child Left Behind and its equally destructive sequel, Race to the Top.

Ms. Scott, next time please ask the PARCC officials and other Common Core boosters to respond to specific criticisms of the many brilliant scholars -- like Diane Ravitch, Yong Zhao and Alfie Kohn -- who have rejected these standards and the associated high-stakes testing, and backed up their criticisms with complete command of the latest research not only in child development and the history and practice of education, but also the distorted politics and popular misconceptions that have led us to this pass.

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