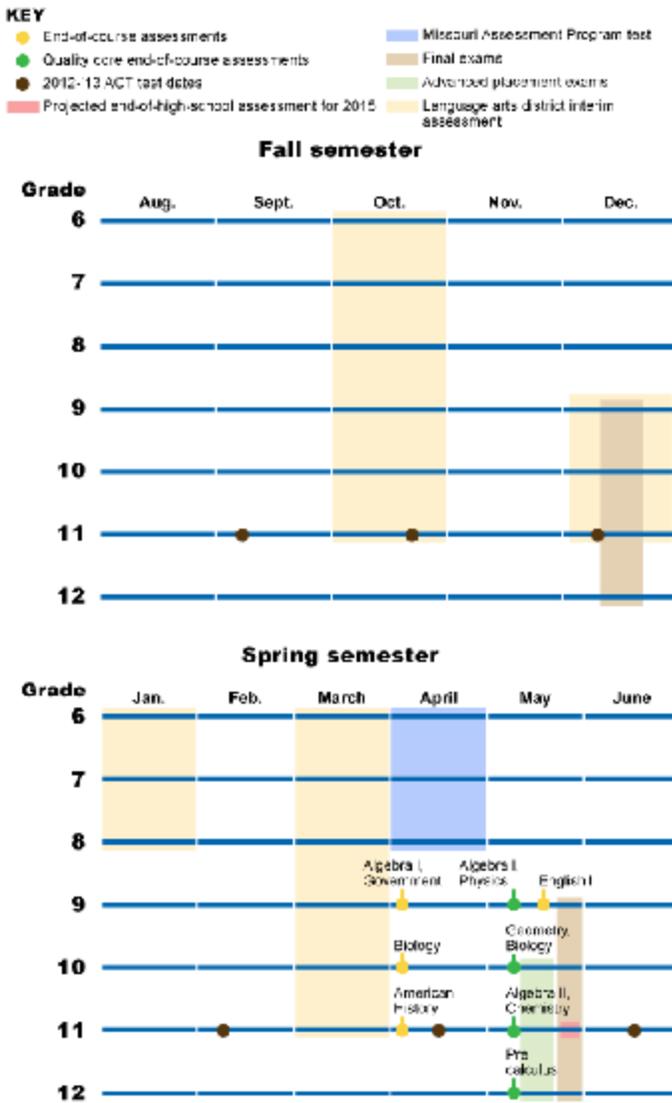


# COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

## Common Core standards set the stage for new state accountability tests

By [Shaina Cavazos](#)

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Sources: COLUMBIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS DISTRICTWIDE ASSESSMENT CALENDAR 2012-13  
SALLY BETH LYON, CHIEF ACADEMIC OFFICER FOR THE DISTRICT

Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium is working with Columbia Public Schools to develop an end-of-high-school assessment and a test to replace the MAP test. The new tests are expected to be given for the first time in spring 2015. The exams will be used for state accountability purposes. The timeline does not include

classroom-specific exams and quizzes. ; [Christina Trestler](#)

*Editor's note: [The third in a series of three stories about Columbia Public Schools' new academic standards](#), this installment addresses how state accountability tests will change in the wake of Common Core and how district assessments are trying to better align with the new standards.*

COLUMBIA — New state accountability tests are on the way for Columbia Public Schools. These tests, expected to start in spring 2015, will reflect skills-based and higher-level learning recently incorporated into the district's curriculum.

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The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium is writing the two new tests. One will replace the Missouri Assessment Program for elementary school children. A second comprehensive exam will be added for high school juniors and will be called an end-of-high-school exam, which will demonstrate whether students are college- and career-ready.

The goal of the new tests is to measure what skills a student has learned rather than just the facts he or she has memorized, district Chief Academic Officer Sally Beth Lyon said. The point isn't to pile on more tests, she said.

But some high school teachers and students are concerned because the more you test, the less time you might have for classroom instruction.

Jonathan Sessions, a Columbia School Board member, said he isn't worried about teachers being expected to teach to a test as a result of the district's transition to the Common Core State Standards.

"There's always going to be a test," Sessions said. "An assessment is not bad if it's actually assessing what students know. If it's a good assessment, it's not bad to assess students' abilities."

This year, the district is also starting to give "interim assessments" that are aligned with Common Core so teachers and students can practice preparing for and taking those kinds of assessments, said Jolene Yoakum, assistant superintendent for secondary education.

Tests based on the standards will focus on analysis, critical thinking and problem-solving

skills, which reflect the essence of the new standards adopted by 45 states and the District of Columbia.

Rock Bridge High School biology teacher Kerri Graham said that from the Smarter Balanced test items she has seen, she thinks the new assessments have the potential to be better than what she's seen in her first 10 years of teaching.

However, the number of tests could be overwhelming.

"I do think that we get out of control with the amount of standardized assessments that we are required to give, and it looks like there are going to be a lot of them around the corner," Graham said.

Rock Bridge senior Maria Kalaitzandonakes said she thinks testing is excessive and way out of line with the things she actually needs post-graduation.

"It's frustrating because when I go into the workplace or when I work with other people, they're not going to say, 'Choice B or C, which one of these is the best answer?'" she said. "It's irritating because it's not the kind of learning I want to do."

A potential scenario in 2015 is that a junior in high school might take three language arts district interim assessments, two sets of final semester exams, three end-of-course assessments, a college entrance exam (either the ACT or SAT), Advanced Placement exams and an end-of-high-school exam.

Those tests are separate from any unit assessments or quizzes a classroom teacher might normally give.

### **Fitting everything in**

Katherine Sasser, a Rock Bridge language arts teacher, said there has been some tension in the integrated language arts and social studies department at Rock Bridge about how to fit in the new district assessments with the existing curriculum.

During the summer, Sasser said, the department received a "huge" package of district assessments that included three tests, each with three parts that reflect the new standards. Although the parts of each test can be administered separately or together, Sasser said, they must be given in a set time period.

She said this is significantly more than language arts teachers were asked to administer last

year.

The assessments are scheduled at logical points in a semester, Lyon said. The more frequent tests are valuable because they can help teachers use the assessments as a way to see what students need to work on, rather than just see a snapshot of how students are performing once a year. Teachers can use the results to see earlier on where students might need more coaching or instruction.

"In order for this not to be teach-by-assessment but rather for assessments to truly communicate information that's helpful for people, we will need to be sure that we're not just adding all of this on top without taking something away," Lyon said.

The district's interim assessments are packaged by theme, and aside from trying to work out how to fit them in timewise, Sasser said the department is trying to see how they fit in with the themes of already-developed curriculum.

For regular classes, it was easier to make the assessments fit in to their lessons, she said, but Sasser's Advanced Placement world history class curriculum is organized chronologically, so the environmentally themed assessment didn't really fit in with what students were learning. The assessment had students use primary- and secondary-source documents to write a narrative-style piece.

### **First year brings new concerns**

As the first year of the tests progresses, questions will be the norm, Sasser said. Can the test prompts be changed to relate to coursework? Are time limits reasonable? Can they be extended?

The district assessment Sasser's students took in October was supposed to take an hour, but it ended up taking three hours once everything had been explained.

Hickman language arts teacher Leia Brooks also said her students took three class periods to complete the assessment when she initially thought it would take only two.

Nick Kremer, district language arts and social studies coordinator for grades six through 12, said that in the past, high school students haven't seen as many districtwide tests as elementary school students, so it makes sense that teachers and students could feel overwhelmed.

Sasser said it's a little hard to tell if her sophomore students notice the additional tests because they are already adjusting to the newness of being in high school. Her Advanced Placement

students ask why they have to take the tests and why they are relevant to their work.

Her students in regular classes were frustrated by the tests, which she said isn't necessarily uncommon when they are asked to do performance-based tasks, such as writing, as opposed to answering multiple-choice questions.

In this first year of using some of the new tests, everything is especially confusing.

"As teachers, we're trying to identify what's meaningful and purposeful and how much to give to Common Core and how much we're doing is already embedded," Sasser said. "Students feel that tension as well. As we muddle through, students have to muddle through as well, and that's not fair for them, but that's their reality."

Rock Bridge math teacher Lisa Holt said many teachers are apprehensive about having to hold their students accountable for information when they are teaching in a new way or at a new pace for the first time, she said.

"How do I make my students' grades be based on what kind of job I did the first time I went through something?" Holt said.

### **Balancing old tests, new standards**

The state-required end-of-course assessments that high school students still have to take in biology, English, algebra and U.S. government are not aligned with Common Core.

The 30-question multiple choice tests are the same for every student in Missouri and are required to count for a portion of a student's final grade. These tests will continue to be implemented as Missouri moves to the Smarter Balanced assessments, but Graham said she thinks teachers need to get more creative with assessments to better enhance a student's learning experience.

Graham said teachers do not know what is on the end-of-course assessments because questions change every year, so it can be difficult to prepare students. To be completely prepared, Graham would have to cover every topic in the textbook, which is not always possible.

As tests start to be better aligned with Common Core, pressure to cover as much content could decrease because the emphasis moves from strictly content to critical-thinking and practical skills and content, Graham said.

As far as No Child Left Behind requirements, Lyon said the future is murky. Missouri was granted a waiver for some of the federal education requirements earlier this year, but those are replaced with different requirements, which Lyon said the district is in the process of finding out. The act was reauthorized in 2002 during President George W. Bush's administration.

### **Early results**

Kentucky was the first state to adopt the Common Core standards in June 2010. According to the Kentucky Department of Education's website, it incorporated the standards into its curriculum in 2010-11 and measured accountability and success for the first time in 2011-12.

The results from the first year of accountability testing, released Nov. 2, show that slightly more than 47 percent of Kentucky's public high school students are prepared for college and careers, based on the state's new Unbridled Learning model. This was a 9 percentage point increase in college- and career-readiness from 2010-11, according to a release from the Kentucky Department of Education.

The release said that it asks parents and the community to understand that this is a baseline for further improvement.

Barbara Reys, an MU math education professor, said that like Kentucky, Columbia is taking an accelerated approach of implementing the new standards, revising curriculum and developing new interim assessments along the way — even as the MAP test and high school end-of-course assessments are still the accountability measures for the state.

Reys, who worked on a team that gave the writers of the math standards feedback, said most other districts in Missouri are not being as proactive.

Reys said she thinks it is best for districts to transition to the new standards as soon as they can to give teachers and students a chance to familiarize themselves with them, but it isn't always easy.

There's also the added pressure, in some cases, for districts who transition to the new standards but don't yet have the end-of-year-accountability tests that accompany them. So until spring 2015, students will learn based on new expectations but take older state accountability tests.

Hickman principal Tracey Conrad said she thinks teachers know how important tests are as a tool to assess what a student knows. The more you can practice a test format before it counts

for the "high stakes" version, the more familiar students are and the better they might do, she said.

However, it's really just a small part of what teachers do every day.

"The standardized test is a snapshot," Conrad said. "And although it's a good measure to help us maintain high standards and accountability, we have to keep in mind that it is one test. The whole picture is a much more accurate demonstration of (students') mastery of knowledge."

*Supervising editor is [Elizabeth Brixey](#).*