

In recent years, a number of new assessments have been introduced to measure the more rigorous K-12 academic standards implemented in most states. Given the importance of high-quality, aligned assessments that ensure students are ready for postsecondary education or the workforce by the end of high school, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute led an [evaluation of four major standardized assessments](#) to determine whether they meet the test quality criteria established by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO).¹ Grade 5 and 8 English language arts (ELA) and mathematics assessments from ACT Aspire, The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (Smarter Balanced), and The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS, 2014) were analyzed.

The evaluation was conducted by a panel of expert practitioners, content experts, and assessment specialists reviewing two forms of each grade-level assessment.² Each test form was reviewed by three-to-four reviewers, whose scores were combined with results from the review of program documentation to produce the ratings for each assessment. The panels specifically considered:

- **Content** - If the assessments have a strong emphasis on the most important content for college and career readiness.
- **Depth** - Whether the assessments require the requisite depth of thinking skills.
- **Overall strengths and weaknesses** - What the overall strengths and weaknesses of each assessment are relative to ELA and mathematics.

Findings

The new “next generation” PARCC and Smarter Balanced assessments are a major improvement over the previous state tests, even the best-in-class MCAS. This is particularly striking with regard to ELA content and depth and mathematics content.

ELA Criterion Ratings		ACT Aspire	MCAS	PARCC	Smarter Balanced
CONTENT	Reading	L	G	E	E
	Writing	L	W	E	E
	Vocabulary and Language Skills	G	L	E	G
	Research and Inquiry	L	W	E	E
	Speaking and Listening	W	W	W	L
DEPTH	Text Quality and Types	G	G	G	E
	Complexity of Texts	G	G	G	G
	Matching Complexity of Standards	W	L	E	G
	High-Quality Items	E	E	E	G
Mathematics Criterion Ratings					
CONTENT	Focus	W	L	G	G
	Concepts, Procedures, Applications	Final ratings could not be determined with confidence.			
DEPTH	Connecting Practice to Content	E	E	E	E
	Matching Complexity of Standards	L	E	G	G
	High-Quality Items	E	E	G	L

Legend: E=Excellent Match, G=Good Match, L=Limited/Uneven Match, W=Weak Match

OVERALL RATINGS	ACT Aspire	MCAS	PARCC	Smarter Balanced
ELA Content	L	L	E	E
ELA Depth	G	G	E	G
Mathematics Content	L	L	G	G
Mathematics Depth	G	E	G	G

Legend: E=Excellent Match, G=Good Match, L=Limited/Uneven Match, W=Weak Match

Recommendations

North Carolina has an important decision to make regarding the adoption of new assessments that align to the state’s standards. As state policymakers contemplate next steps, the study’s authors offer the following recommendations for consideration:³

1. **Make quality non-negotiable** – State assessments serve as an important tool for gauging quality and progress of public schools and students.
2. When developing or revising assessments, **carefully prioritize the set of skills and knowledge at each grade** that should serve as the focus of instruction, building public understanding and support.
3. Ensure quality is maintained, while **addressing concerns about testing time and costs**.
4. Work with other state leaders to **press researchers and the assessment industry for improvements** in test item types and scoring engines to enhance the measurement of key constructs in a cost-effective way.

¹ Of the six CCSSO criteria, two are applicable to the research questions for this study.

² The Human Resources Research Organization (HumRRO) has also released a companion [report](#) on the content and quality of next generation high school assessments.

³ For more details, read: Doorey, Nancy and Morgan Polikoff. (2016). *Evaluating the Content and Quality of Next Generation Assessments*: 70-72. Thomas B. Fordham Institute.



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