

## TCAP and PARCC Student Tests

Linda Wesson, Associate Legislative Research Analyst  
(615) 401-7881/ [Linda.Wesson@cot.tn.gov](mailto:Linda.Wesson@cot.tn.gov)

July 2013

### TCAP and state standards

The Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program, or TCAP, is a set of statewide assessments given to Tennessee public school students each year.<sup>1</sup> The test items are “criterion-referenced,” which means they measure student performance against specific standards, which, for TCAP, are the state curriculum standards set by the State Board of Education. The board’s standards for each subject area in grades K-8 and for courses in grades 9-12 specify learning expectations and performance indicators, which detail the specific things students should know and be able to do upon completion of the grade or course.<sup>2</sup>

### How is TCAP related to the Tennessee Diploma Project?

Tennessee joined the American Diploma Project Network in 2007 in an effort to raise Tennessee’s standards to better prepare students for success after high school. The Diploma Project Network, eventually comprising 35 state affiliates, was created by the nonprofit organization Achieve, founded in 1996 by a bipartisan group of governors and corporate leaders to support standards-based education reform.<sup>3</sup> In 2008, the Tennessee State Board of Education adopted more rigorous academic standards and graduation requirements as a result of the Tennessee Diploma Project. The Department of Education worked with test vendors to assess the degree of alignment between TCAP and the revised standards and performance indicators, revise TCAP achievement tests for grades 3-8, and develop new end-of-course assessments for high school courses. The revamped achievement tests were first administered in spring 2010.

### How are TCAP tests aligned with state standards?

All test items go through the following multi-step process designed to ensure alignment with state standards:

- Test vendor consultants write test items based on Tennessee’s state performance indicators (see endnote 2 for a sample performance indicator), and the vendor reviews test items for compliance with state contract specifications.
- Item Review Committees, which are made up of Tennessee teachers, counselors, administrators, and supervisors review test items for accuracy, alignment with curriculum standards and performance indicators, and bias and sensitivity.<sup>4</sup> The vendor revises test items based on input from the Item Review Committees.
- Tennessee curriculum and instruction specialists and assessment specialists review the revised test items. All test items, reading passages, and illustrations must be approved by the Department of Education before field testing.
- Items are field tested, and those that meet reliability, validity, and other technical parameters are included in the pool of approved items for use in actual tests.<sup>5</sup>

### What does TCAP cost?

For all TCAP assessments—including achievement, end of course, and writing tests—contracts with Measurement, Inc., and NCS Pearson, Inc., totaled \$40 million for fiscal year 2012-13; approximately 77 percent of this total was state funded and the rest was federally

funded.<sup>6</sup> The cost for the achievement tests portion was \$21.6 million. An additional six-year contact with R & A Solutions for technical support services related to TCAP for \$19.9 million is federally funded.

A 2012 Brookings Institution report found that the national average cost for state achievement testing in grades 3-9 was \$27 per pupil, although there was a large variation among states. According to the report Tennessee's cost per pupil for achievement testing was \$27.<sup>7</sup>

### **Common Core State Standards and PARCC**

In 2008, the Common Core State Standards initiative was launched by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers to provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn for success in college and careers. Achieve, the nonprofit that organized the Diploma Project network, was a partner on the initiative and participated in the standards writing and review process.<sup>8</sup> The Common Core State Standards were released in June 2010 and were adopted by the Tennessee State Board of Education in July 2010. Tennessee school districts began phasing in the Common Core standards in 2011-12.

The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or PARCC, is a state consortium (18 states and the District of Columbia) organized to develop K-12 assessments based on the Common Core State Standards in math and English language arts.<sup>9</sup> PARCC's governing board comprises the chief educational officers of the 18 jurisdictions that have committed to using PARCC assessments exclusively. Tennessee became a governing state in 2010. Each governing state designates lead staff to serve on the PARCC Leadership Team and to coordinate state participation on committees and working groups.

PARCC states are scheduled to administer the fully operational tests in 2014-15. PARCC assessments will be computer-based with performance components that shift away from traditional multiple-choice formats. The PARCC assessments will replace Tennessee's current TCAP tests for math, reading/language arts, and writing; TCAP will continue to be administered for science and social studies.<sup>10</sup>

### **How are PARCC assessments aligned with Common Core State Standards?**

The process of aligning the PARCC assessments with the Common Core State Standards began with the development of "model content frameworks" as a bridge between the Common Core State Standards and the PARCC assessments. The frameworks are intended to help educators in implementing the standards and to help contracted test developers design test items.<sup>11</sup> PARCC developed assessment blueprints from the frameworks which detail the content and structure of the assessments, including the total number of tasks or items for each component, the standards measured, and the type of items and point values for each.<sup>12</sup> PARCC enlisted member states' content experts, classroom teachers, higher education faculty, and its contracted vendors to develop the framework and blueprint documents to ensure their alignment with Common Core State Standards.

In a process similar to that for TCAP, once test items are developed, multiple reviews are carried out to ensure the test items are aligned with the standards and are of acceptable quality and rigor. PARCC test item reviewers, which include state experts, local educators, postsecondary faculty, and community members, are nominated by their state education agency. Tennessee's involvement includes 12 members of the Department of Education, four district educators on item review committees, and 11 professors on content and bias and sensitivity committees.<sup>13</sup>

All PARCC test items go through the following multi-step process designed to ensure alignment with the Common Core State Standards:

- Local school district staff and higher education faculty from PARCC states review test items, including reading passages, for suitability of content.
- Citizens of PARCC states and educators from various backgrounds review test items for bias and acceptability to students, parents, and communities.
- State education officials and staff of local school districts and higher education institutions from PARCC states, as part of core leadership groups, review all test items and reading passages. At least one member of each

leadership group will review revisions made to test items and approve items for inclusion in the final pool.

- PARCC field tests will be administered in spring 2014. Schools and classrooms selected for the field tests will be announced in August 2013. Trial runs of test items with 2,300 students were held this past spring and another 4,800 students will participate in trials this summer.

#### **What does PARCC cost?**

PARCC is funded through a \$186 million federal grant through the Race to the Top assessment program. PARCC contracted with test developers NCS Pearson,

Inc., and Educational Testing Service, which are working with a set of subcontractors, for the first phase of test design. One or both contracts may be renewed in summer 2013 for the second phase.

PARCC estimates that its computer-based math and English language arts tests will cost \$29.50 per student, which is about the median cost for those two tests among member states. PARCC will make paper-and-pencil tests available for the first year of testing (2014-15). Paper-and-pencil assessments are projected to cost an additional \$3.00 to \$4.00 more per student than the computer-based version to cover additional costs (e.g., printing, mailing, shipping).

## Endnotes

- 1 The Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program includes the achievement tests given to students in grades 3-8 in reading/language arts, math, science, and social studies, the End of Course exams given to high school students enrolled in various courses (e.g., algebra, biology, English, U.S. History), and the Writing Assessments given in grades 5, 8, and 11. Some schools choose to administer the TCAP achievement test to students in grades K-2.
- 2 For example, the 5<sup>th</sup> grade English standard for “language” lists three expectations and 16 performance indicators. One expectation is “Demonstrate knowledge of standard English usage, mechanics, and spelling.” A related indicator is “Identify the correct use of verbs within context.” See links to all current curriculum standards and performance indicators at <http://www.state.tn.us/education/curriculum.shtml>.
- 3 Governor Bill Haslam is a member of Achieve’s Board of Directors.
- 4 Content Review Committees comprise Tennessee teachers. Bias Review Committees comprise Tennessee counselors, administrators, and supervisors.
- 5 Adapted from Tennessee Education Association, *Testing 1-2-3: Your Questions Answered*, [no date], <http://teateachers.org/>, and Tennessee Department of Education Contract #FA-08-024189-00; and confirmed as current practice by Tony Plunkett, Director of Assessment Design, Tennessee Department of Education, email, July 15, 2013.
- 6 Department of Education Contracts #FA-08-24189, #FA-09-26537-00, and #FA-10-29361, with associated amendments, obtained from Comptroller of the Treasury, Office of Management Services.
- 7 In 2012 dollars, based only on standard achievement tests for grades 3-9 in available contract years between 2007-2012. Matthew M. Chingos, *Strength in Numbers: State Spending on K-12 Assessment Systems*, Brown Center on Education Policy at Brookings, Nov. 2012, <http://www.brookings.edu/> (accessed July 24, 2013).
- 8 Achieve also serves as the project manager partner for PARCC.
- 9 Governing board states as of July 24, 2013, include Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, the District of Columbia, Florida, Illinois, Indiana,\* Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma,\* Rhode Island, and Tennessee. (\* Oklahoma has announced it will develop its own tests but may remain a PARCC member; Indiana passed legislation pausing its rollout of the Common Core and is not currently participating in governing board meetings.) Kentucky is a participating member and does not serve on the governing board. Florida serves as PARCC’s fiscal agent, and states rotate the chairmanship; the current chair is Massachusetts. PARCC became a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization in March 2013.
- 10 The English language arts tests will be given in grades 3-11 and the math tests will be given in grades 3-8 and in high school math courses. The PARCC tests will include a performance-based component for students to demonstrate their application of skills, and an end-of-year component that measures reading comprehension and understanding of math concepts. The scores of the two components will be combined for one score in each subject. A speaking and listening assessment is also required but PARCC does not envision combining results from this assessment with those for English language arts and math. Optional PARCC tests for diagnostic and mid-year assessment purposes will also be available.
- 11 To review the frameworks for all grades and courses, see <http://www.parcconline.org/parcc-model-content-frameworks>.
- 12 For more information about assessment blueprints, see <http://www.parcconline.org/assessment-blueprints-test-specs>.
- 13 Tennessee Department of Education, *The Common Core State Standards: History and Fact Sheet*, p.7, <http://www.tncore.org/> (accessed July 12, 2013).



OFFICES OF RESEARCH AND EDUCATION ACCOUNTABILITY  
Phillip Doss, Director  
Suite 1700, James K. Polk Building ▪ 505 Deaderick Street  
Nashville, Tennessee 37243 ▪ (615) 401-7866  
[www.comptroller.tn.gov/orea](http://www.comptroller.tn.gov/orea)

