

U.S. Asks Educators to Reinvent Student Tests, and How They Are Given

Standardized exams — the multiple-choice, bubble tests in math and reading that have played a growing role in American public education in recent years — are being overhauled. Over the next four years, two groups of states, 44 in all, will get \$330 million to work with hundreds of university professors and testing experts to design a series of new assessments that officials say will look very different from those in use today.

The new tests, which Secretary of Education Arne Duncan described in a speech in Virginia on Thursday, are to be ready for the 2014-15 school year. They will be computer-based, Mr. Duncan said, and will measure higher-order skills ignored by the multiple-choice exams used in nearly every state, including students' ability to read complex texts, synthesize information and do research projects. "The use of smarter technology in assessments," Mr. Duncan said, "makes it possible to assess students by asking them to design products of experiments, to manipulate parameters, run tests and record data."

Because the new tests will be computerized and will be administered several times throughout the school year, they are expected to provide faster feedback to teachers than the current tests about what students are learning and what might need to be retaught. "If these plans work out, it'll turn the current testing system upside down," said Bruce Fuller, an education professor at Berkeley. The tests are being redesigned to assess the common academic standards in English and math that nearly 40 states have adopted in recent months. One group, led by Florida, will be made up of 25 states and the District of Columbia. Among its members are several large states like California, Illinois and New York. Known as the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, the group was awarded \$170 million. The other group, whose membership overlaps the first, has 31 states and is led by Washington. It includes other Western states like Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon and Utah, as well as some in the East, like Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont. The group, which won \$160 million, calls itself the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium. Twelve of the 44 states, including Colorado, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Ohio, are participating in both groups but are expected eventually to choose one set of tests.