Common Core FAQ

**Q. What are the Common Core State Standards?**

A. Most states have a set of academic standards they want their students to meet at various grade levels. Oregon, along with more than 40 other states nationwide, has replaced its individual state standards with a series of national standards for reading and math. These are known as the Common Core State Standards.

**Q. Was this necessary?**

A. Supporters say the standards are higher and will better prepare students for what they’ll need to be able to do in college and the work force. They’ll now be consistent across most of the country, and participating states will be able to share resources and make state-to-state comparisons.

Opponents say the standards haven’t been fully tested, cost too much, will lead to standardized curriculum nationwide and will rely on data mining that delves even more heavily into students’ personal information.

**Q. What’s different?**

A. More difficult concepts, such as algebra, will be introduced at earlier ages, and certain subjects will receive a more in-depth look than in previous years. Schools will place a big emphasis on reading for factual information as opposed to reading fiction. Students will spend more time analyzing graphs, charts, maps and statistics. They’ll be expected to use this information to develop and defend a conclusion.

Probably the most noticeable difference will be in the state tests, however. Up until now, Oregon has measured its standards through the Oregon Assessment of Knowledge and Skills, or OAKS. These tests are multiple-choice exams offered three times a year.

The new tests, called Smarter Balanced, will be given just once a year. They’re expected to be harder and more complex and will require students to explain and defend their answers in addition to just filling in multiple-choice bubbles.

**Q. What if my child doesn’t pass?**

A. The state tests don’t determine whether a student moves from grade to grade. They come into play for real only at graduation, when students are expected to show they’ve met the state’s “essential skill” standard before they receive a diploma. Families also can opt out of the test altogether, just as they can now.

**Q. Are these harder tests going to make it harder to graduate?**

A. Not necessarily. Just like now, a student doesn’t have to rely on a passing grade on his state assessment test to graduate. Most do, but other proof is acceptable, including work samples or scores from other standardized tests.

Also, the state is using a conversion scale to see what score a student needs to get on the Smarter Balanced test that would match what used to be the passing score on the OAKS test. If a student meets that match, he may not pass the Smarter Balanced test, but he will be considered to have met the “essential skill” requirement.

State spokeswoman Crystal Greene of the Oregon Department of Education cautions that students who meet the essential skill level but don’t pass Smarter Balanced may not be as ready for college or the workforce as they might think they are.

Nearly 70 percent of Oregon’s graduates find they need to take remedial courses in math or reading once they get to a community college. Smarter Balanced sets the bar higher; the state hopes high enough that those who pass won’t need to do any backtracking in college.

**Q. If these tests are really hard, is my school going to bomb and make my district report card look bad?**

A. Yes and no. Greene said the state definitely is prepared to see a lot of low scores in the first few years as people adjust to the new system.

That said, the school and district report cards are based on a normative rating system; comparing the schools against the ideal standard. Some of Oregon’s schools will end up at the bottom of the achievement pile, some at the top, and most in the middle.

The whole group may shift downward if everyone does poorly on the new tests, but it shouldn’t change the overall outcome, which is what gets published on the state report card.

Said Greene: “The drop we anticipate doesn’t mean students know less. ... It’s just a better picture of where they are in relation to college and career readiness. We are raising the bar so all kids have the opportunity to go on and be fully successful after high school.”