

# Georgia Milestones is New Statewide Assessment

*October 2014*

American students have been taking standardized tests since the mid-1800s, yet never before has more emphasis been placed on these assessments. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 introduced a new era of educational accountability and the number of tests students must take has increased dramatically since its enactment. We see its impact as test scores are not only used to compare and grade students, but also to measure schools, districts, teachers, and administrators. Testing is important, but it is easy to get confused about the main purposes of testing. The goal is not just to score a final grade, but also to guide teachers' instruction in ways that improve student achievement.

Education in Georgia is going through many changes this year, especially in the assessment of student learning. Georgia began to implement the new College and Career Ready Georgia Performance Standards (CCGPS) for Math and Language Arts in 2012. According to the state, these standards are designed to be more relevant to students and help them develop the skills and knowledge they need. Their learning should support their choice to attend college or enter the work force after they graduate from one of our high schools. The standards emphasize critical thinking over memorizing facts because we believe students must be able to demonstrate that they can use the facts they learn.

New assessments always follow new standards, and students and teachers will see big differences this year in the format of the state's required assessments. The tests will still contain many multiple-choice questions with the addition of new question types. Students will be asked to explain answers to some problems in writing. Teachers are adapting daily instruction to help students get ready for the new testing format. The new questions will challenge students of all levels, which may be frustrating for some students and parents. For example, a good math student may be able to perform many mathematical calculations in his head and is not used to writing out every step on paper. While he can give the correct answer, it will require a different way of thinking to explain those steps that come naturally.

Scoring will also change. Tests will no longer be graded entirely by scanning the answer documents. Educators who grade "constructed responses" at the state level will use rubrics and other guidelines to measure students' writing and communication skills. Current state rules require students in grades three, five, and eight to earn a minimum score for promotion to the next grade. Grading written responses will take more time and scores are not expected to be ready before the end of the school year. As a result, at least for this year, the state has waived the minimum score requirement for promotion in these three grades. Instead, decisions about promotion or retention will be based on other assessments and trained teacher observations. During the next few years, the Georgia Department of Education expects to provide results to districts more quickly and in an easy-to-read format. This will help teachers and parents discuss each student's progress.

The new assessments are designed to allow for comparison of student growth. Whitfield County students will be measured with their academic peers from other districts, other states, and across the nation. This comparison was not possible before. Georgia will join many states using these new types of tests. In fact, the United States is the only economically advanced nation to rely heavily on multiple-choice answers. Other nations have long been evaluating students on more real-world projects in addition to short answer questions.

The way students take tests will also change over the next few years as we move from paper and pencil to digital tests. This year, 30 percent of our students must take these tests on computers with a goal that 100 percent of testing will be competed online within five years. Computer-based assessments are more efficient and also more challenging for many districts, including Whitfield County, due to the need for speedy and secure computers and networks. So far, we are meeting that challenge thanks to ESPLOST revenue. This source of funding approved by our community helps us provide the appropriate technology to administer tests online.

People often focus on the stress of standardized testing, but there are also positive aspects. Standardized tests give teachers a guide to help them decide what to teach and when to teach it. I am certain standardized testing is here to stay, so the task for educators is to create balance. Standardized tests should certainly be used, within reason, to help measure student and school success. It should also remain only one of many indicators used to assess progress and growth.