

Why Common Core and the New Associated Assessment Systems are Important and Valuable to the Teaching Profession

By Darren Burris

Take a look at these examples of third grade math assessment questions from the CMT and Smarter Balanced tests. How do they compare?

At first glance, these two questions may appear very similar, but they reveal several key changes for students and teachers in the upcoming Common Core assessments. (In Massachusetts, where I teach, we will be using PARCC assessments. In Connecticut, you'll use Smarter Balanced.)

GRADE 3 MATH [CMT]
Mrs. Smith's class collected cans for 5 days to take to the town food bank. Lea collected 4 cans and Susan collected 8. Which number sentence could be used to find out how many **more** cans Susan collected than Lea?

ANSWER

A $8-4=$
B $5 \times 4=$
C $8+4=$
D $5+4=$

GRADE 3 MATH [SBAC]
Lisa had 3 pizzas. Each pizza was cut into 8 pieces. Lisa ate 2 pieces. How many pieces were left? Write an equation to show how many pieces were left.

ANSWER $(3 \times 8) - 2 = 22$

Examples from CMT and Smarter Balanced sample tests, pulled from Kathleen Megan's article in the Hartford Courant, titled, "Common Core Standards to Change State's Education Landscape".

The CMT question provides a scenario that students are required to model as a mathematical equation by selecting the correct equation from four choices. The Smarter Balanced question also provides a scenario that students are required to model as a mathematical equation; however, it requires students to *create* the model of the situation, instead of picking it from several options.

This small change is a significant shift. By moving beyond the multiple-choice format, this Smarter Balanced question removes the presence of a correct answer, the ability

to guess a correct response, or the possibility that test prep strategies helped to eliminate answer choices. Instead, the Smarter Balanced question requires that a student must know the relevant mathematics to answer correctly.

In awarding points, the Smarter Balanced test considers both (a) the process of arriving at the correct answer and (b) the actual correct answer. In this way, students who arrive

at the correct answer (22) are rewarded with some of the points, but students who can also represent how they got that answer ((3x8)-2) are awarded additional points. As a result there is a more complete assessment of what students know and are able to do. This emphasis on mastery of content over test preparation allows teachers to better understand our students' misconceptions as well as their strengths.

Beyond the assessments, Common Core has also created other new opportunities for me to grow as a teacher. Last year, I described in [the Hechinger Report](#) why I believe that the Common Core State Standards are an unprecedented tool for teacher development and collaboration. Common Core defines what students should know and be able to do, but does not dictate how I, or any teacher, should create learning experiences to meet those expectations. The result is that, across the nation, teachers will be working toward common goals while employing different strategies to help students achieve them. This is a chance for teachers to learn from each other about what works and what doesn't. It's a chance to draw on a vast set of resources and lessons learned-not only from other teachers, but also other states and districts. Personally, I have already learned a great deal from North Carolina's work on interpreting the standards, the mathematical progressions done by Arizona, and the work on curriculum by New York. I believe education is better when we are able to work together, and establishing common standards is one clear way that we can do that.

Lastly, Common Core is exciting for me as a father. I want the expectations set for my own three children to be high and to prepare them to solve problems in a more authentic way. But I also want the measures of those expectations to provide their teachers and me with a full picture of their mastery of those concepts. I am hopeful--as teachers, schools, districts, and states work together on curricula and associated assessments of student performance---that the education of all children will benefit from our common efforts to continually improve public education.

I encourage those interested in investigating the Common Core assessment systems further to explore the breadth, scope, and diversity of what is being developed. The example above represents a minor, yet significant shift. However, moving to online assessment opens up a whole variety of new and compelling ways for students to show what they know and are able to do. You can access the free online assessment examples at the [Smarter Balanced Test Portal](#).

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