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Grant to pay for new student testing

State will be able to compare its results with others in consortium

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A federal grant will help develop statewide computerized tests for Wisconsin elementary and secondary school students that are expected to provide near-immediate feedback and comparisons to test takers in other states, education officials announced Thursday.

The state belongs to the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium, which is expected to reap about \$160 million to help develop the new testing program for its 31 state members. Another coalition of 26 states, some of which also are in the SMARTER consortium, was awarded \$170 million by the U.S. Department of Education.

"I am convinced that this new generation of state assessments will be an absolute game-changer in public education," U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan told a school reform group Thursday [in remarks posted to his department's website](#). "For the first time, millions of schoolchildren, parents and teachers will know if students are on-track for colleges and careers - and if they are ready to enter college without the need for remedial instruction."

The grant means the state will not have to pay to develop a new testing program, said Jennifer Thayer, assistant state superintendent for reading and student achievement at the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. Thayer was unwilling to put a price to how much the grant will save the state, but said it would bring "a much better exam for much less cost."

State schools superintendent Tony Evers announced last year that he planned to phase out the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examinations to make way for a new assessment. At the time, he said state school leaders hoped the new system could be administered on computers, using test questions that change based on student answers, thereby yielding results in shorter periods of time.

With such a system, a student who gets a question right will move on to more advanced questions while students who answer wrong will encounter more questions aimed at pinpointing their skill level. Testing experts say such programs occupy less time because they require students to answer fewer questions overall.

New tests by 2014

In a statement issued Thursday, Evers said the assessments in English and math that are being worked on by the consortium will be given to students in grades three through eight and 11 by the 2014-'15 school year.

"We're very happy with the announcement because it's the exact direction we wanted to go and it's funding to help us get there because, with the economy the way it is, it would be difficult to do alone as one state," Thayer said.

The tests developed by the consortium will be aligned to the [Common Core State Standards](#) in English and math, a cross-state initiative that also has been embraced by Wisconsin to provide more specific and rigorous benchmarks on what students need to know in those subjects.

Wisconsin has had an active role in the consortium as a "governing state," Thayer said. DPI assessment director Lynette Russell also serves on the consortium's six-member executive committee, she said.

Because so many states belong to the consortium and have agreed to adopt the same standards as Wisconsin, the new assessment is expected to allow the state to compare its student achievement results with those from states such as Hawaii, Iowa, Pennsylvania and New Mexico.

"We don't know that all 31 (states) will stay in the consortium the entire time," Thayer said. "But we expect it to be a large majority of them, so we expect that we will be able to compare across the states in this consortium."

Talks also are under way to see if enough similarities can be found in the assessment developed by the other coalition that received funding to provide a wider comparison, Thayer said.

The only test allowing for state comparisons has been the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a survey-type test that produces statewide results but can't be used to evaluate schools or districts.

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