

# Frequently Asked Questions

## Transition from Traditional Midterms and Finals

### What is changing?

Traditional midterm and final examination periods will no longer be scheduled as separate, building-wide testing weeks.

Instead, students will complete rigorous, standards-aligned assessments throughout each marking period. These may include common unit assessments, cumulative assessments, writing tasks, laboratory practicals, projects, presentations, performance tasks, and other course-appropriate measures of student learning.

The shift moves assessment into the instructional cycle, allowing teachers to use the results while students are still learning the material.

### Why is the district making this change?

The decision followed an extended review of student performance data, instructional time, student feedback, assessment practices, and the models used in other school districts.

The review raised several important questions:

- Do traditional midterms and finals provide the most accurate picture of student learning?
- Is the amount of instructional time used for exam preparation and administration justified by the information received?
- Can assessments given throughout the course provide more immediate and useful information?
- Are there other ways to maintain rigor while supporting deeper learning, student wellness, and timely intervention?

The purpose is not to assess students less. It is to assess students more effectively and at points when the results can still be used to support their learning.

### Is this change lowering academic standards?

No. Academic rigor and high expectations remain non-negotiable.

Students will continue to be responsible for mastering course content, applying previously learned skills, preparing for assessments, completing extended assignments, and demonstrating understanding in multiple ways.

The change is about the format and timing of assessment, not the level of difficulty or the amount students are expected to learn. We emphasized protecting rigor, accurately measuring student learning, providing meaningful feedback, and preparing students for college, careers, and life beyond high school.

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## **Will students still take tests and exams?**

Yes. Students will continue to take tests, quizzes, common assessments, and other rigorous evaluations throughout the school year. The difference is that students' performance will not be concentrated into a separate midterm or final examination period carrying a significant stand-alone weight.

## **Will students still complete cumulative assessments?**

Yes. Depending on the course, students may complete common unit assessments or benchmark assessments that cover multiple topics taught over an extended period.

For example, an assessment may require students to apply skills and concepts from several units, connect new learning to previously taught material, or synthesize information through writing, problem-solving, laboratory work, or a performance task.

The change does not eliminate summative assessments. It allows learning to be assessed at meaningful points throughout the course rather than waiting until the midpoint or conclusion of a full-year class.

## **How will this provide students with more immediate feedback?**

Under the traditional model, a midterm or final score was often received after several months of instruction. By that point, the class may have already moved to new material or the course may have been completed (semester courses)

With assessments embedded throughout the course, teachers can identify specific standards or skills with which students are struggling. Teachers can then reteach concepts, provide intervention, adjust instruction, or offer additional support before the course ends.

The goal is for assessment results to become information that improves learning, not simply a score recorded after instruction has already occurred.

## **How will final grades be calculated in a full-year course?**

Each of the four marking periods will count for 25 percent of the final course grade. There will no longer be a separate midterm or final examination category. Common assessments and other course assessments will be included within the appropriate marking-period grade.

This means that a student's final grade will reflect performance throughout the entire school year rather than placing a separate high-stakes weight on a small number of testing days.

## **Will every course use the same type of assessment?**

No. A rigorous assessment should reflect the skills and standards of the course.

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A mathematics course may use common problem-solving assessments. An English course may use common writing tasks, reading assessments, or presentations. A science course may use written examinations, laboratory practicals, or research-based tasks. Other courses may use projects, performances, demonstrations, portfolios, or a combination of assessment formats.

The format may differ, but the expectation that students demonstrate mastery of course standards will remain consistent.

## **What is a common assessment?**

A common assessment is developed collaboratively by teachers who teach the same course and level. It measures standards and provides a consistent way to examine student learning across different class sections.

Common assessments may include:

- Shared questions or tasks
- Common learning standards
- Common rubrics
- Shared scoring expectations
- Collaborative review of student results

They allow course teams to identify strengths, learning gaps, and areas in which instruction may need to be adjusted.

## **How will assessments be consistent across different teachers?**

Teachers who teach the same course and level will work collaboratively with their department supervisors to identify essential standards, develop common assessments or tasks, and establish shared expectations for scoring.

Consistency does not mean that every teacher must teach in exactly the same manner. It means that students enrolled in the same course and level will be expected to demonstrate mastery of the same essential learning standards.

## **Will projects replace all traditional tests?**

No. The new model is not a shift to projects only.

Students may be assessed through tests, written responses, essays, laboratory practicals, projects, presentations, performances, portfolios, or other course-specific measures. In some courses, students will experience a combination of assessment formats.

Traditional tests remain an appropriate assessment tool. The goal is to avoid relying too heavily on one examination given at a single point in time.

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## **Will students have more tests throughout the year?**

While students may take more common assessments across a department than traditional midterms and finals, these are designed to replace some of the tests that would have normally occurred during the marking period.

Instead of cramming high-stakes material into two cumulative exams, assessments will be spread out across the marking period to align with course pacing and standards. Because learning objectives vary by subject, the exact frequency and format will differ by class.

Ultimately, students will continue to be assessed regularly, but in a way that is more purposeful, coordinated, and directly integrated into day-to-day learning.

## **How does this prepare students for college?**

College assessment practices vary significantly. Depending on the course, college students may complete examinations, research papers, laboratory work, presentations, projects, performances, or cumulative assignments.

Our students will continue to experience rigorous assessments throughout the year. They will still need to study, retain information, manage deadlines, organize materials, and demonstrate mastery. The skills and expectations remain the same even though the assessment calendar is changing.

## **Will students still develop study habits, time-management skills, and testing endurance?**

Yes. Students will still be expected to prepare for significant assessments, manage long-term assignments, meet deadlines, organize their materials, and retain previously learned information.

These skills will be practiced repeatedly throughout the year rather than being concentrated primarily around two examination periods.

Students in AP courses will also continue preparing for College Board examinations, and students will continue participating in applicable state assessments.

## **What did the district learn from comparing course grades with midterm and final exam scores?**

Across all academic departments, midterm and final exam scores showed a consistent decline compared with students' course grades. For some students, these exam scores lowered the final earned course grade by as much as five points.

This did not suggest that course grades were inaccurate. Rather, it raised questions about whether a single high-stakes exam measured the same learning demonstrated over time, or

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also reflected factors such as stress, test-taking stamina, preparation, and performance under timed conditions.

## **How much instructional time will be recovered?**

Traditional midterm and final examinations required approximately eight days for administration alone.

When review days, preparation, makeups, schedule changes, and other examination-related interruptions were considered, the total instructional impact could reach approximately 12 to 16 days, depending on the course and the number of review days used. We cannot remove state testing, which is an additional 5 to 7 days.

The midterm and final exam days can now be used for continued instruction, targeted support, enrichment, common assessments, feedback, and opportunities for students to apply their learning.

## **Does removing midterms and finals mean students will be assessed less?**

No. Recovering those instructional days does not mean less assessments.

It means that teaching and assessment can continue together. Students can complete an assessment, receive feedback, and then use that feedback to improve while the course is still in progress. The shift allows more time for instruction without eliminating accountability or expectations.

## **What other school districts were reviewed?**

The review included neighboring districts and other high-performing New Jersey school systems.

Among the comparable large school systems reviewed in Middlesex County, East Brunswick was the only district continuing a traditional, separately scheduled midterm model. Other high-performing districts use different combinations of year-end assessments, course-embedded tests, projects, presentations, and performance tasks.

## **Were alternatives to eliminating traditional midterms and finals considered?**

Yes. The review considered several possible options, including:

- Retaining the existing model
- Reducing the weight of midterms and finals
- Shortening or changing the examination schedule
- Eliminating midterms while retaining finals
- Administering assessments during normal class periods
- Using projects, portfolios, laboratory practicals, writing tasks, or performance assessments

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- Developing common assessments throughout the marking periods
- Using a combination of traditional and alternative assessment formats

The review was structured around three possible outcomes: retain, revise, or replace the current model.

## **Why not simply reduce the weight of midterms and finals?**

Reducing the weight would address the impact on a student's grade, but it would not fully address the other concerns identified during the review.

A lower-weight examination would still require dedicated testing days, review time, schedule changes, makeups, and significant preparation. It would also continue to provide results relatively late in the instructional process.

Embedding assessments throughout the course allows teachers to receive information sooner and respond while students still have time to improve.

## **Does this change affect AP examinations or state assessments?**

No. This change applies to the district's traditional midterm and final examination structure. Students will continue to participate in all applicable assessments, including:

- AP examinations
- NJGPA
- NJSLA
- PSAT

AP courses will continue to prepare students for the rigor, content, and format of their respective AP examinations.

## **How will the district determine whether the new model is successful?**

The implementation will be reviewed using multiple measures, including:

- Student performance on common assessments
- Course grades
- Performance by learning standard
- Consistency across course sections
- AP and applicable state assessment results
- Results across different student groups
- Curriculum pacing and coverage
- Opportunities for intervention and reteaching
- Student and teacher feedback
- Assessment workload
- The amount of instructional time recovered

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## **Can the new assessment model be adjusted?**

Yes. Assessment practices should continue to be reviewed based on student results, teacher experience, course needs, and feedback from the school community.

Adjustments may include changes to assessment frequency, cumulative components, rubrics, common tasks, professional development, or department expectations.

The purpose of the shift is to improve assessment practices. That requires ongoing monitoring, reflection, and a willingness to make adjustments when the evidence supports them.

## **What will remain the same?**

Students will continue to:

- Complete rigorous coursework
- Study for tests and other assessments
- Be responsible for previously learned material
- Complete writing, projects, laboratory work, and presentations
- Receive grades based on demonstrated learning
- Be held to clear academic standards
- Prepare for college, careers, and life after high school

The expectations remain high. What is changing is the structure used to measure and support student learning.

## **How does this change support student mental health and well-being?**

Student mental health was one of several factors considered during the review. Traditional midterm and final examination periods concentrated multiple high-stakes assessments into a very short period of time. Students reported concerns related to compressed study schedules, increased anxiety, sleep disruption, pressure to perform on a single assessment, and an increased reliance on short-term memorization or “cramming.”

The new approach does not remove academic pressure or the responsibility to prepare for assessments. Students will still be expected to study, manage their time, meet deadlines, and perform on rigorous examinations and assignments. However, assessments will be distributed more appropriately throughout the school year rather than concentrated into two high-stakes testing periods.

This structure provides students with more regular opportunities to demonstrate learning and receive feedback. It also allows teachers to identify concerns earlier and provide support before a student’s difficulty becomes reflected in a major semester or final examination grade.

Academic rigor and student well-being are not competing goals. The purpose of the shift is to maintain high expectations while using an assessment structure that supports deeper learning, more balanced workloads, and healthier preparation practices.

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## What does the research show?

Research supports the idea that students learn best when they are regularly asked to retrieve, apply, and build upon what they have learned over time. The evidence suggests that this does not need to occur primarily through one heavily weighted midterm or final exam.

Several large meta-analyses, which combine the results of many individual studies, provide important findings:

- Formative assessment improves achievement. A 2024 analysis of 118 K-12 studies found a positive effect on student learning when teachers regularly assessed understanding, provided feedback, and adjusted instruction during the learning process.
- Cumulative testing is valuable. A review of 222 studies involving more than 48,000 students found that regularly retrieving previously learned information improves learning. Importantly, this supports ongoing cumulative assessment, not specifically a traditional midterm or final.
- Students can demonstrate rigorous learning in different ways. Research also supports well-designed projects and performance assessments that measure application, problem solving, critical thinking, communication, and transfer of knowledge.
- High-stakes testing can introduce stress as a factor in performance. Research has found relationships between test anxiety, physiological stress, and academic performance.

In simple terms: the research supports rigor, cumulative learning, and long-term retention, but it does not show that every course needs a heavily weighted traditional midterm and final exam to achieve those goals.