



PARENTS' GUIDE TO PARCC ASSESSMENTS IN MASSACHUSETTS

In the spring of 2015, students in Massachusetts took one of two assessments aligned to the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks: the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) test or the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) test. Individual districts decided whether students would take MCAS or PARCC. Both assessments gauge how well students are mastering the standards outlined in the Frameworks and ultimately how ready they are for the next grade and for college and careers after graduation.

The districts that used PARCC for grades 3-8 in 2015 will use that assessment again in 2016. The remaining districts have chosen between MCAS or PARCC for students in grades 3-8 to take in 2016. All students in grade 10 will take MCAS. The 2016 MCAS test will include a limited number of PARCC questions to help make statewide comparisons easier and to let students and staff experience PARCC items while the next-generation MCAS is being developed for 2017. The next-generation MCAS will include elements of MCAS and of PARCC.

This document highlights only the PARCC assessments for English language arts (ELA) and mathematics.

WHY PARCC ASSESSMENTS?

Teachers and principals talk a lot about assessments, which are used to measure students' academic achievement. This document highlights the end-of-year summative assessments, which judge (1) student progress toward mastering state standards and (2) program and school effectiveness. For other assessments used, see box at right.

Types of assessments

Classroom-based: Individual tests given by teachers as needed throughout the year to assess knowledge and skills in specific areas

Interim: The same test repeated at set intervals to measure student growth over time

THIS GUIDE INCLUDES:

- Overview of assessments which measure student proficiency against more challenging standards
- Overview of accountability for students, teachers and schools
- Additional resources for parents

PARCC tests, and soon, the state's next-generation MCAS, reflect higher academic standards adopted by Massachusetts in 2010. They focus on the critical thinking, problem solving, and reasoning skills students need to be successful in today's world.



The tests not only evaluate student progress toward college and career readiness, but also show teachers and families where a student needs help or is excelling so they are able to personalize instruction and meet individual student needs. These tests provide important information to help us ensure all students, regardless of income or family background, have access to a world-class education that will prepare them for success in the next grade and beyond.

WHO HELPED CREATE THE TESTS?

Hundreds of classroom teachers, higher education faculty, subject experts and school administrators from participating states have dedicated thousands of hours to the development of PARCC tests and will continue to be involved at every step. More than 30 educators and other experts, including parents and community members, reviewed each test question. Higher education professors and instructors have also collaborated with classroom teachers since the beginning to ensure the assessments track student progress toward college and career readiness.

What is different about the PARCC assessments?

ELA assessments demonstrate:

- Whether students can read and comprehend texts of varying complexities
- How well students can integrate information across sources to make a persuasive argument
- The degree to which students can use context to determine the meaning of academic vocabulary

Math assessments demonstrate:

- Whether students understand and can use important math ideas, including number sense, algebraic thinking, geometry, and analyzing data
- The extent to which students can use math facts and reasoning skills to solve real-world problems
- How well students can make math arguments

Benefits of PARCC assessments:



- Computer-based assessments will replace pencil and paper tests (exceptions will be made for schools that do not yet have the technology). Computer-based assessments are more efficient, innovative, and engaging—and they enable teachers and parents to better monitor student progress at multiple points. Massachusetts’ next-generation MCAS, which will include elements of PARCC, is being developed with the goal that all students will eventually take the assessment on a computer.
- PARCC allows students to show their work and explain their reasoning so teachers can better understand what they know and where there are gaps in learning that need to be addressed.
- Rather than focusing on what a child has memorized through multiple choice questions, PARCC asks students to apply skills like thinking, reasoning and justifying answers—showing what they know and can do.
- PARCC does not lend itself to “teaching to the test.” Since it focuses on applying skills, it is the daily practice of these skills in the classroom that will serve as the best preparation for the tests.
- PARCC is designed to provide accurate measures of achievement and growth for students with disabilities and English language learners, allowing these students to perform to their potential. Accommodations are available with the goal of making the assessments more accessible and to produce results that are valid for these students. For students with disabilities, the online assessments will address visual, auditory and physical access barriers. These students will be able to take a test individualized to meet their needs at the same time as other students in their class. Tools have also been developed to help English language learners demonstrate their knowledge in the various content areas (e.g., math, science and social science), regardless of their level of proficiency in English.

College and career readiness defined:

The level of preparation a student needs to enroll and succeed—without remediation—in a credit-bearing course at a postsecondary institution that offers a baccalaureate degree or in a high-quality certificate program that enables students to enter a career pathway with potential future advancement.

The PARCC tests differ from the MCAS tests in a number of ways, including:

- PARCC tests students in grades 3-11; MCAS currently tests students in grades 3-8 and 10.
- PARCC assesses writing at all grade levels; MCAS currently only assesses writing in grades 4, 7, and 10.
- PARCC has five levels of students performance, including a level that indicates college and career readiness; MCAS currently reports four performance categories (Advanced, Proficient, Needs Improvement, Warning/Failing).
- PARCC allows us to compare student performance in Massachusetts to student performance in other states that also take PARCC; MCAS is a custom test that only Massachusetts students take.



Sample Questions

The following questions are representative of those found on the new assessments. For more examples visit parcconline.org/assessments/practice-tests.

SAMPLE QUESTION FOR 4TH GRADE MATH STUDENTS

Three classes at Lakeview School are going on a field trip. The table shows the number of people in each class, including the teacher.

They can choose to use buses, vans, and cars.

	Total number of people
Mrs. Ruiz's Class	23
Mr. Yang's Class	25
Mrs. Evans' Class	24



Buses have 20 seats



Vans have 16 seats



Cars have 5 seats

Which three combinations can be used to take all three classes on a field trip?

- 1 bus and 4 vans
- 1 bus and 8 cars
- 3 vans and 11 cars
- 2 buses and 3 vans and 4 cars
- 1 bus and 1 van and 6 cars

Submit Answer

SAMPLE QUESTION FOR 6TH GRADE ENGLISH STUDENTS

Students are asked to read a passage from the fictional text “Julie of the Wolves” by Jean C. George and answer the following:

SAMPLE ITEM

In the passage, the author developed a strong character named Miyax. Think about Miyax and the details the author used to create the character. The passage ends with Miyax waiting for the black wolf to look at her.

Write an original story to continue where the passage ended. In your story, be sure to use what you have learned about the character Miyax as you tell what happens to her next.

Answer:

What Parents Can Expect

The PARCC assessments are designed to measure the more rigorous expectations of the Massachusetts standards adopted in 2010. Because the tests measure complex skills, which are different from the skills measured by previous state tests, scores on the test will look lower. But students aren't doing worse—it's just that the bar is higher.

As students and teachers gain the skills and knowledge needed to meet the new, higher standards, performance will also improve. Massachusetts saw this same trend after MCAS started in 1998.

PARCC SCORE REPORTS

The score report gives you a snapshot of how your child is progressing and shows where he or she excels or needs more support. This information, along with grades, teacher feedback and scores on other tests, will help give a more complete picture of how well your child is performing academically.

The new score reports describing students' results on the new tests will be very different from what we've seen in the past. Scores will be different because the English language arts and math tests are based on a different set of academic standards.

While no single test tells us everything we need to know about how a student is performing in school, these test scores, along with information about students' work in the classroom, give you the information you need to know about how your child is progressing.

Here is what you can expect to learn from the report:

- Your student's overall score in the subject area
- What this overall score means
- Your student's strengths and areas for improvement in certain topics in each subject area
- How well your student performed compared to other students in the school, district, state and other states

Understanding the PARCC Assessment Score Card

Overall Student Performance: Your student's overall score (out of a possible 850) and performance level (1-5) gives a quick glimpse of whether he or she is on-track with grade-level expectations. Level 1 indicates the greatest need for improvement and Level 5 indicates the strongest performance.

Performance Levels: The second page of the report provides information on the different performance levels. They describe how well students met grade-level expectations.

Score Graph: The colored graph shows the score ranges for each performance level and where your child's score falls within that range. This gives you an indication of how close your child is to achieving the next level.

Score Comparisons: Unlike many previous state test score reports, PARCC score reports show how your student is performing compared to students in the same grade at the same school, across the school district, around the state, and across the states administering the PARCC tests.

States score reports may differ depending on the type of assessment a state utilizes and also whether or not it chooses to customize the report. States will report scores in several ways, which can serve different purposes for their stakeholders.

How will schools support students during the transition?

Schools have created a variety of models to assist students who are struggling with the standards. Remediation and summer courses, in-class adjustments based on ongoing in-class assessment results, and pull-out tutoring are just a few support strategies.

How are school districts and schools held accountable?

Districts that use the PARCC exam will not see their accountability level fall based on student performance on that exam in 2016, but they could see their accountability level rise. In other words, accountability levels for schools and districts that use PARCC in spring 2016 are being held harmless. In 2017, all districts will use the next-generation MCAS, which will include elements of both PARCC and MCAS.

All Massachusetts high schools will use the MCAS exam in 2016 and 2017 for grade 10 students, and high schools will be held accountable based on student performance on the exam and other factors in both years.

In addition to test scores, the state accountability system uses student growth and other factors to classify all schools into Levels 1-5 (more information is available here: mass.gov/edu/docs/ese/accountability/annual-reports/lea-brochure.pdf):

- Level 1: Meeting gap-narrowing goals among groups of students
- Level 2: Not meeting gap-narrowing goals (or MCAS participation of less than 95 percent)
- Level 3: Among lowest performing 20 percent of schools or subgroups (or MCAS participation of less than 90 percent or persistently low graduation rates)
- Level 4: Among lowest achieving and least improving schools
- Level 5: Chronically underperforming schools

By state law, the Massachusetts Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education has the power to designate a school as Level 5 in circumstances of chronically poor performance based on school or district review regardless of which test the school administers.

How are students, teachers and principals held accountable?

In order to graduate, all grade 10 students must pass the MCAS tests in English language arts, math and at least one science subject, and must complete all district-level requirements. Students will have multiple opportunities, if necessary, to pass these tests.

Student growth percentiles, which are derived from student test scores over time, will eventually be incorporated into teacher evaluations along with other measures of student learning. However, the overriding factor in Massachusetts educator evaluations is the professional judgment of the evaluator.

Take Action

Parents are their child's best advocates. As a parent and your child's first teacher, you should be informed of the assessment and accountability system that is in place in your child's school. Parents and families must be at the table with school leaders and school districts to ensure that testing is implemented well and with enough resources to ensure success.

Massachusetts should include parents and teachers in thoughtful conversations based on trust, collaboration, and respect. For additional details about the assessment and accountability system, please check the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education website at doe.mass.edu/mcas/home.html and mass.gov/edu/government/departments-and-boards/ese/programs/accountability/ or call the Department's assessment office at (781) 338-3625 or accountability office at (781) 338-3535. Here are some questions you might want to ask:

- How many assessments will my child take this school year, and where can I access/view the assessment calendar?
- What will happen if my child does not meet proficiency levels on the new assessments?
- How will the results of tests be used to support my child's learning?
- What can I do, as a parent, to help my child do his or her best?
- How will school evaluations be affected based on results of the new assessments?

Also, be sure to speak with your local school administrators! Ask them to host a parent night in the spring to explain the tests, and in the fall to explain test results.

Below is the list of policies and practices that National PTA supports. Check with the Department of Education to determine if Massachusetts' policies and practices are closely aligned with those of the PTA.

- National PTA believes that valid assessment does not consist of only a single test score, and that at no time should a single test be considered the sole determinant of a student's academic or work future.
- The National PTA supports nationally agreed upon voluntary standards if they are derived by consensus at the state and local levels. Parents must be involved in this process.
- National PTA believes that assessments provide valuable information to parents, teachers, and school leaders about the growth and achievement of their students. Furthermore, having annual data on the performance of students can help inform teaching and learning as well as identify achievement gaps among groups of students within a school and among school districts. National PTA believes assessments are essential to ensure that all students receive a high-quality education.

Preparing and Supporting Your Child

- Review the testing calendar and work with your child's school to ensure there will be regular and clear communications from the school on the assessments, the results and how they are used.
- Discuss new tests with your children. Make sure they feel comfortable and understand why they are taking a test.
- With older children, explain that the new assessments were created to make sure they are on track to succeed after graduation and to identify any issues early enough to give them more support.
- Explain to your child that PARCC and the next-generation MCAS will probably be more challenging initially. Tell your child you have high expectations, and that you and the teachers are there to help every step of the way.
- Review test results with your child and his or her teacher.
- Make sure your child has a comfortable place for studying and is prepared mentally and physically for a test.

Staying informed and involved

- Become familiar with the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks: doe.mass.edu/frameworks
- To see samples of new test questions and how the assessments were developed, visit parconline.org/assessments/practice-tests
- Read all comments written by the teacher. Ask teachers to explain anything that is unclear and discuss how you can best work together to address areas of improvement for your child.
- Monitor your child's progress and regularly communicate with your child's teachers. If your child needs extra help or wants to learn more about a subject, work with his or her teacher to identify opportunities for tutoring, after-school clubs or other resources.
- Remember that tests are not perfect measures of what a child can do — there are many other factors that might influence a test score. For example, a child can be affected by the way he or she is feeling on test day or the particular classroom setting.
- Meet with your child's teacher as often as possible to discuss his or her progress. Ask for activities to do at home to help prepare for tests and improve your child's proficiency.

Additional resources

- For more information on assessments in Massachusetts, visit: doe.mass.edu/mcas
- For more information on school and district performance in Massachusetts, visit: profiles.doe.mass.edu
- For information on the PARCC consortium, of which Massachusetts is a member, visit: parconline.org
- For information on the assessment score reports and for tips on supporting your child's learning at home, visit: UnderstandtheScore.org
- For specific learning activities and supplemental homework aligned to the PARCC tests, parents can use *Be A Learning Hero Skill Builder*. Visit: bealearninghero.org/skill-builder