



PARENTS' GUIDE TO NEW ASSESSMENTS IN MINNESOTA

The Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCA) are the state tests that are given every year to measure student progress toward Minnesota's K-12 Academic standards in the areas of reading, mathematics and science.

Reading and mathematics tests are administered in every year in grades 3–8. In high school, students in grade 10 take the reading MCA, and students in grade 11 take the mathematics MCA. The science MCA is administered to students in grades 5 and 8. In high school students take the science MCA whenever they take a life science or biology course.

The new reading MCA was first given to students in 2013. The new mathematics MCA was first given to students in grades 3-8 in 2011; grade 11 students first took the new mathematics MCA in 2014. The new science MCA was first given to students in 2012.

The reading MCA only covers the reading portion of the English language arts (ELA) standards. The other ELA subjects, including writing, speaking and listening are assessed at the classroom level. Minnesota's ELA standards were revised in 2010. The science MCA is aligned to the science standards revised in 2009. The mathematics MCA is aligned to the mathematics standards revised in 2007.

The assessments gauge how well students are mastering the standards—and ultimately how ready they are for the next grade and for college and careers after graduation.

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

Summative: End-of-year assessments administered by the state to measure student performance against a common set of standards

This document addresses summative assessments.

THIS GUIDE INCLUDES:

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

Why new 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 on the previous page.

New summative assessments will address longstanding concerns that parents, educators and employers have had about current state assessments—namely that they measure ability to memorize facts, rather than the skills to think critically and apply knowledge.

What is different about the new assessments?

The new assessments for English and mathematics will enable educators to deepen their understanding of student progress from grade to grade—and, just as importantly, identify any gaps in progress so they can address them **well before students enter college or the workforce.**

Reading assessments will 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 will demonstrate:

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

Science assessments demonstrate knowledge in the following areas:

- The history and nature of science and engineering
- Life science
- Earth science
- Physical science

Benefits of New Assessments:

- The assessments allow 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, the new tests ask students to apply skills like thinking, reasoning and justifying answers—showing what they know and can do.
- The tests do not lend themselves to “teaching to the test.” Since they focus on applying skills, it is the daily practice of these skills in the classroom that will serve as the best preparation for the tests.
- Minnesota tests are administered online only. Computer-based assessments are more efficient, innovative and engaging, and they enable insight into student progress at multiple points. Paper accommodations are available for eligible students, including large print and Braille.
- The online reading and mathematics MCA are adaptive tests, which means that the test adjusts to each student’s responses on the previous test questions. The online science MCA is not an adaptive test.
- The new assessments will be designed to provide accurate measures of achievement and growth for all students, including those with disabilities and English language learners.

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.

Sample Questions by Grade Level

The following questions are representative of those found on the new assessments.

EXAMPLE OF A FOURTH-GRADE MATH QUESTION

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.



Buses have 20 seats



Vans have 16 seats



Cars have 5 seats

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

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

EXAMPLE OF A SIXTH-GRADE ELA QUESTION

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:

EXAMPLE OF A TENTH-GRADE ELA QUESTION

SAMPLE ITEM

Use what you have learned from reading "Daedalus and Icarus" by Ovid and "To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Triumph" by Anne Sexton to write an essay that provides an analysis of how Sexton transforms Daedalus and Icarus.

As a starting point, you may want to consider what is emphasized, absent, or different in the two texts, but feel free to develop your own focus for analysis.

Develop your essay by providing textual evidence from both texts. Be sure to follow the conventions of standard English.

Answer:

What Parents Can Expect

MCA results are used to find out how well schools have aligned curriculum to and instructed students in the Minnesota Academic Standards in reading, mathematics and science. Schools use the information to improve classroom teaching and learning. Teachers and principals look for areas where students do well so they can reinforce the ways they teach these skills. They also look for areas that need improvement so they can increase instructional time or modify their instruction. The reading and mathematics assessments are also used in federal school accountability measurements.

How should parents interpret score reports?

The MCA measures student performance relative to the Minnesota Academic Standards. An Individual Student Report (ISR) is generated for each student who takes the MCA. The ISR describes the student's performance in terms of achievement level, comparisons to various groups and comparisons to the student's performance in past years (when applicable). However, no single assessment can completely measure a student's learning in school.

The Achievement Level Descriptors (ALDs) give descriptive information about what typical students are expected to know based on the Minnesota Academic Standards. In addition, they give information about the basic skills and knowledge expected of the typical student at each achievement level. They also give concrete meaning to a scale score and its associated achievement level.

Students do not pass or fail the MCA. Students are assigned an achievement level based on their scaled score. A scaled score is a conversion of a student's raw score on a test or a version of the test to a common scale that allows for a numerical comparison between students. The four achievement levels for the MCA as they relate to Minnesota Academic Standards are:

1. Exceeds the Standards (E)
2. Meets the Standards (M)
3. Partially Meets the Standards (P)
4. Does Not Meet the Standards (D)

School and district results are available in the Minnesota Report Card section of the Data Center on the MDE website, rc.education.state.mn.us. (Go to: Test Results.)

How do schools support students?

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. Parents should collaborate with teachers and administrators to develop a plan as needed.

Minnesota uses the assessment scores to help develop targeted support and remediation plans for students to ensure they are getting the support they need to succeed. Each district is required to create its own plan to align curriculum and instruction so that students are college- and career-ready.

How are schools, students, and teachers held accountable?

The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) has implemented an accountability system that provides schools a better look at how they are doing. The Multiple Measurement Rating (MMR) looks at several performance categories, including proficiency, growth, achievement gap reduction and graduation rates. Schools receive a rating in each category, which are then combined for a final score. Assessments help further highlight where there are gaps in performance. Schools and educators can use the test scores to see what's working and what curriculum and instruction strategies need to be refined.

Schools that are identified as the lowest performing or with the largest achievement gaps (designated as Priority and Focus Schools, respectively) must develop improvement plans, setting goals and working with Minnesota Department of Education staff to ensure progress. A school is designated as Priority or Focus for three years, which allows sufficient time for new practices to take root.

In addition, the highest performing schools are designated as Reward and Celebration Schools. These schools will be looked at for best practices that can be shared with other districts across the state. Under the MMR system, the state has set a goal of reducing all achievement gaps by half by 2017.

In the short term, there will be no negative consequences for students who do not meet proficiency

targets, such as holding them back a year. Instead, Minnesota will use the assessment scores to help develop targeted support and remediation plans for students, teachers and schools to ensure they are getting the support they need to succeed.

In 2012, the Minnesota Legislature also passed Principal and Teacher evaluation laws. With models being developed by the state and pilots currently underway, schools have had their own evaluation systems in place since 2014–15 school year.

School and district accountability results are available in the Minnesota Report Card section of the Data Center on the MDE website, rc.education.state.mn.us. (Go to: School Performance).

TAKE ACTION: Parents can work with school or district curriculum directors to learn about the new curriculum and understand how to support their children to minimize any dips in assessment scores.



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.

The Minnesota Department of Education should include parents and teachers in thoughtful conversations based on trust, collaboration and respect. For additional details about the state's assessment and accountability plan, please call the Department at (651) 582-8200. 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 Minnesota Department of Education to determine if their policies and practices are closely aligned.

- 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.
- 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 the new tests with your children. Make sure they feel comfortable and understand why they are taking a test.
- Make sure your child has a comfortable place for studying, and is prepared mentally and physically for 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 the tests will initially be more challenging. 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.

Staying informed and involved

- To become familiar with Minnesota's College and Career Ready Standards, visit: education.state.mn.us/MDE/EdExc/StanCurri
- To learn more about the MCA, visit: education.state.mn.us/MDE/SchSup/TestAdmin/MNTests/index.html
- Read all comments written by the teacher on classroom lessons and tests. 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

- Visit the Minnesota Department of Education website: education.state.mn.us/mde/index