



PARENTS' GUIDE TO NEW ASSESSMENTS IN PENNSYLVANIA

In spring 2015, a new version of the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics was administered to students in grades 3-8. This assessment was the first PSSA to be fully aligned to the more rigorous Pennsylvania Core Standards that were adopted in fall 2013.

High school students took the Keystone Exams, which are end-of-course assessments in certain content areas. These exams serve two purposes: (1) high school accountability assessments for federal and state purposes, and (2) high school graduation requirements for students beginning with the class of 2019.

The Keystone Exams are one component of Pennsylvania's system of high school graduation requirements. Keystone Exams will help school districts guide students toward meeting state standards.

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

This guide focuses on English language arts and mathematics assessments.

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 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

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
- Overview of accountability for students, teachers and schools
- Additional resources for parents



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.

Among the indicators that ELA assessments can demonstrate are:

- 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.

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.
- The PSSA and Keystone Exams can be taken online and are encouraged by the Department of Education. 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 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 3RD GRADE ELA QUESTION

SAMPLE ITEM

The speaker uses the following lines to make a comparison about words.

and soft as new grass,
lightwhite as dandelion plumes,

The lines are used to show that the speaker sees words as

- A. alive.
- B. useful.
- C. gentle.*
- D. successful.

EXAMPLE OF AN 8TH GRADE MATHEMATICS QUESTION

SAMPLE ITEM

The human body contains about 1×10^{12} bacteria. The human body contains about 4×10^4 genes. The number of bacteria contained in the human body is how many times as great as the number of genes contained in the human body?

- A. 250
- B. 4,000
- C. 25,000,000 *
- D. 400,000,000

EXAMPLE OF ALGEBRA 1 KEYSTONE MATHEMATICS QUESTION

SAMPLE ITEM

A band is determining how many songs to record a new album. The band members want to record no more than 16 songs, and their album has to be shorter than 78 minutes. They can record short songs that are about 3 minutes in length or long songs that are about 5 minutes in length. Which system of inequalities **best** represents the number of short songs (x) and the number of long songs (y) the band can record for the new album?

- A. $x+y < 16$
 $3x+5y \leq 78$
- B. $x+y \leq 16^*$
 $3x+5y < 78$
- C. $x+y \leq 78$
 $3x+5y < 16$
- D. $x+y \leq 16$
 $3x+5y \leq 16$

What Parents Can Expect

The new assessments in ELA and mathematics are designed to measure the new, more rigorous expectations of the state standards. Because the tests measure complex skills, which are different from previous state tests, scores on the assessments 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. In other states where more rigorous tests have been implemented, students improved performance after the first year.

How should parents interpret score reports?

Results on standardized tests are not the sole indicator of student achievement. It is important to evaluate students using a variety of performance measures.

A Student Report is generated for each student who takes the PSSA or Keystone Exam. The scores on the report represent a snapshot in time and help determine a baseline level of performance for future test scores.

For each subject, a student receives a performance level rating:

- The Below Basic Level reflects inadequate academic performance
- The Basic Level reflects marginal performance
- The Proficient Level reflects satisfactory academic performance
- The Advanced Level reflects superior academic performance

The PSSA Student Report also gives students' PSSA scores for various subjects and the number of total points possible. In addition, a strength profile is given in various reporting categories for each subject. For example, in the subject of reading, a student might receive a medium strength profile in vocabulary acquisition and use. This part of the report can help identify areas where students need improvement.

For more information about a student's performance on PSSA or Keystone Exams, parents should consult the school or the classroom teacher. Also, a report interpretation guide is available at education.pa.us. Type "student report guide" in the search field.

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

▶ 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.

How are schools, students, and teachers held accountable?

Beginning in 2013, Pennsylvania has held schools accountable by using four specific annual quantifiable objectives:

- Participation rate
- Graduation or attendance rate
- Success in closing the achievement gap: all students
- Success in closing the achievement gap: historically underperforming students

In addition, The Pennsylvania School Performance Profile (SPP) offers a web-based resource for districts/schools to communicate performance results to various constituencies and assists districts and schools in aligning and focusing resources for continuous improvement.

The SPP also serves several other purposes:

- Provides a building level academic score for educators as part of the Educator Effectiveness System
- Provides information used in determining federal accountability status for Title I schools
- Informs the public of the academic performance measures of each school, comprehensive career and technical center, cyber charter and charter school in Pennsylvania
- Provides resources to support schools as they seek to improve academic performance

For more information, visit: paschoolperformance.org/

For teachers, under Pennsylvania's Educator Effectiveness System, only a small portion of teacher evaluation is based on student performance on assessments.

Currently, the Pennsylvania Department of Education is leading an effort to consider ways to modify the SPP to create a more holistic measure to evaluate schools and students with less reliance on standardized tests.

Starting in 2019, students must pass the Keystone Exams or complete a project-based assessment in order to graduate high school. For now, even if students do not meet proficiency levels, there will be no negative consequences such as holding them back a year. Instead, parents can work with the school to develop an improvement plan tailored to the students' specific needs.





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 Pennsylvania 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 (717) 783-6788. 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 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?

Below is the list of policies and practices that National PTA supports. Check with the Pennsylvania Department of Education to determine if their 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.
- 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 a school district. 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.
- 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 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 Pennsylvania's Core Standards and the PSSA. Visit: education.pa.gov/Pages/PSSA-Information.aspx#.VoK0BVLXt8E
- 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.
- 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 Pennsylvania Department of Education website: education.pa.gov