



Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA)

Understanding the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA)

Students across the country are required to participate in standardized assessments to measure their progress as a part of the No Child Left Behind Act. In Pennsylvania, the umbrella program that oversees the various assessments is called the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA). This has been developed over time, in alignment with state academic standards, to ensure that all children in Pennsylvania are performing to levels of proficiency.

The assessments that students take provide a wealth of data: areas of strengths and weaknesses in the academic performance of students can be seen, teacher and school practices that help promote proficiency can be seen and whether schools are meeting their adequate yearly progress in having all students meet the standards can be seen. Starting in grade 3, the No Child Left Behind Act calls upon students to be assessed in Reading and Mathematics yearly through grade 8 and then again in high school; students must also be assessed in Science in grades 4, 8 and 11. States may put in place additional assessment to ensure thorough oversight of student performance.

Students in Pennsylvania will take the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) in Math and Reading in grades 3-8. Students in grades 5, 8 and 11 will take the PSSA in Writing. Students in grades 4, 8 and 11 will take the PSSA in Science. These are given in the March/April timeframe and there are retest opportunities. For students with disabilities that require an alternate assessment, one is available. For students who require testing accommodations per an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), those are provided.

All of these assessments have been developed based on the curriculum standards in use in Pennsylvania's schools. The Academic Standards lays out a clear framework for the knowledge required of each subject area and the assessments cover that information. In addition, the Pennsylvania Board of Education put in place Anchor Content Standards that provides increased clarity about how to tie instruction from the state's curriculum to best classroom practices in promoting proficiency on the assessments. There are four levels of proficiency a student may achieve on these assessments; Advanced, Proficient, Basic and Below Basic.

Pennsylvania also uses an assessment called the Keystone Exams. Those are not being given in 2011-2012 but will resume in 2012-2013.

Format of the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA)

Students take the state assessment in Mathematics in grades 3-8 and 11. The assessment is criterion-referenced meaning that it is tied to the expectations of learning in math. Those expectations are that students will become proficient in the following topics: numbers and operations, measurement, geometry, algebra and data analysis (probability, statistics). Questions are given in multiple-choice and open-ended formats.

The Science assessment is given to students in grades 4, 8 and 11. This assessment is referenced to the academic standards laid out for science education in Pennsylvania. The subject matters covered on the

assessment are: the nature of science, biological, physical, earth and space science. The test asks both multiple-choice and open-ended items.

On the Reading assessment which is given to students in grades 3-8 and 11, students' abilities in reading comprehension, interpretation and analysis are tested. Students are presented with both fiction and non-fiction upon which multiple-choice and open-ended questions are based. Specific genres of literature are targeted for different grade levels so that content on the assessments is grade-level appropriate.

Students taking the Writing assessment in grades 5, 8 and 11 are asked both multiple-choice questions and to respond to writing prompts. The assessment provides passages and asks questions about editing and revising based on standards language conventions. Students are then given two common and one field test prompt to write about. For students in grade 5 there is a planning page provided for the writing; for students in grades 8 and 11 the writing asked for is informational or persuasive in style.

Taking the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA)

The Mathematics Assessment for students in all grades 3-8 and 11 have 60-72 multiple-choice questions and 3-4 open-ended questions. The questions are scored differently, multiple choice items are worth one point and open-ended questions are scored on a 0-4 scale. Students have 180 minutes for the assessment and timing accommodations are offered to students who require them.

On the Science Assessment, for students in grades 4 and 8 there are 58 multiple choice questions and 5 open-ended questions. The multiple-choice questions are worth one point and the open-ended questions worth 2 points. Students in grade 11 have 50 multiple-choice questions worth 1 point, 6 open-ended questions worth 2 points and 3 open-ended questions worth four points. Additionally, there are field test questions in the examination that are not reported in the scoring. This test is given in over 180 minutes as well.

The Reading Assessment asks questions about reading passages in multiple-choice and open-ended formats. Multiple-choice questions are worth one point and open-ended questions are worth 3 points. There are scoring guidelines used for scoring the open-ended responses. The Reading Assessments can take up to 215 minutes to complete, with breaks between sections.

The Writing Assessment that is given to students in 5th, 8th and 11th grade gives students 5 passages with 4 questions each on how the passage should be edited or revised. Following that, there are three writing prompts, one of which is a field test prompt and will not factor into the overall score. Students in grades 8 and 11 will be asked to write in informational or persuasive modes. The essays are scored by humans using a holistic rubric that grades for focus, content, organization and style.

On all assessments students receive two scores: one on a scale and one that displays the level of proficiency that the scale score represents. The scale score is based on the number of questions on the test and the number answered correctly, the levels of performance are Advanced, Proficient, Basic, and Below Basic. The cut scores are provided to see where the cut-off between performance levels is and where in the performance field a student's score falls.