

Frequently
Asked
Questions

Information for Parents or Guardians

Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA)

English Language Arts Assessment, April 13–17, 2015

Mathematics Assessment, April 20–24, 2015

Science Assessment, April 27–May 1, 2015



GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE PSSA

Which schools participate?

All school districts and charter schools participate in the assessments. Nonpublic schools may also participate on a voluntary basis.

Which students take the assessments?

Except for a very few students who meet specific criteria for participation in an alternate assessment, all students are included in the assessments as outlined below:

ELA & Mathematics – Grades 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8

Science – Grades 4 and 8

Who decided what the assessment should measure?

Groups of educators from all levels of education in Pennsylvania chose the areas of knowledge upon which the assessment is based. The groups included teachers, supervisors, curriculum directors, and college specialists. They also reviewed, edited, and approved the test items.

Who administers the assessment?

Each school chooses the person(s) who will administer the assessment. In most cases, these are the students' teachers, who are often helped by the principal or a guidance counselor.

How are the results reported?

Two copies of the individual student report for all assessments will be sent to the school districts and charter schools for distribution to parents, teachers, guidance counselors, and/or principals. The state will not receive any report with individual names included.

School-level reports will be used for curricular and planning purposes. School districts and charter schools may publish the results of PSSA testing for each school. The state will also release school-by-school assessment data.

May parents see the assessments?

Parents and guardians may review the assessments by making arrangements with the School Assessment Coordinator once the assessments arrive at the school. Confidentiality agreements must be signed, and no copies of the assessments or notes about assessment items will be permitted to leave the school.

If after reviewing the test parents/guardians find the test to be in conflict with their religious belief and wish their student (s) to be excused from the test, the parents/guardians must provide a written request that states the objection to the Superintendent or Chief Academic Officer.

INFORMATION ABOUT THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS ASSESSMENTS (grades 3–8)

How long does the assessment take?

The entire English Language Arts assessment takes approximately three to four hours to complete. Your school district should inform you about the assessment schedule.

What does the assessment include?

Each student completes four sections of questions for the English Language Arts assessment. Some portions will be the same for all students, and some will consist of different groups of questions.

What types of questions are on the assessment?

Students respond to three types of questions: multiple-choice, selected-response, and constructed-response. In a multiple-choice question, the correct answer is chosen from four options. Selected-response questions have two parts, and students select one or more answers for each part. Constructed-response questions require students to compose their responses. These include a writing prompt, short-answer questions (grade 3 only), and text-dependent analysis questions (grades 4–8 only). The writing prompt requires students to compose a response using one of three modes (narrative, informative/explanatory, or opinion in grades 3–5 and narrative, informative/explanatory, or argumentative in grades 6–8). Short-answer questions require students to compose a brief response to support their answer. For the text-dependent analysis question, students analyze a text and use evidence from the passage to compose an essay.

How are written responses to open-ended items scored?

The written responses for English Language Arts are scored by evaluators trained in applying a pre-determined scoring system. For short-answer questions, scores are based on content only. Spelling and

punctuation are not included as part of the scoring process. For writing prompts, scores are determined using a holistic scoring guideline that includes composition skills as well as conventions. Responses to text-dependent analysis questions are scored based on content and conventions.

What is assessed in English Language Arts?

The English Language Arts assessment addresses six major reporting categories as well as two text types. Students respond to standalone multiple-choice items assessing language and a writing prompt. Additionally, students read a number of passages from literature and informational genres and respond to questions about these passages that indicate both comprehension and reading skills and their analysis and interpretation of different types of texts.

INFORMATION ABOUT THE MATHEMATICS ASSESSMENT (grades 3–8)

How long does the assessment take?

The entire mathematics assessment takes approximately three to four hours to complete. Your school district should inform you about the assessment schedule.

What do the assessments include?

Each student completes three sections of questions for the mathematics assessment. Some portions will be the same for all students, and some will consist of different groups of questions.

What types of questions are on the assessments?

Students respond to two types of questions: multiple-choice and open-ended. In a multiple-choice question, the correct answer is chosen from the four presented options, while open-ended questions require students to compose their responses. Open-ended questions generally require students to provide detail in support of their answers (such as showing or describing the steps performed to complete a calculation).

How are written responses to open-ended items scored?

The written responses for mathematics open-ended items are scored by evaluators trained in applying a pre-determined scoring system. In mathematics, scores are based on content only. Spelling and punctuation are not included as part of the scoring process.

What is assessed in Mathematics?

The mathematics assessment addresses five major reporting categories across four clusters. The reporting categories assessed and the proportion of items in each reporting category vary by grade level. As a part of the assessment of Cluster A, Numbers and Operations, students in grades 4-8 respond to a section of items

in which a calculator is not permitted. Open-ended items require the students to show all of their work (calculations, graphs, drawings, etc.) and/or to explain in writing how they solved the problems.

INFORMATION ABOUT THE SCIENCE ASSESSMENT (grades 4 and 8)

How long does the assessment take?

The entire science assessment takes approximately two to four hours to complete. Your school district should inform you about the assessment schedule.

What does the assessment include?

Students in grades 4 and 8 complete two sections of questions for the science assessment. Some portions will be the same for all students, and some will consist of different groups of questions.

What types of questions are on the assessment?

Students respond to two types of questions: multiple-choice and open-ended. In a multiple-choice question, the correct answer is chosen from the four presented options, while open-ended questions require students to compose their responses. At grade 8, the science assessment also includes science scenarios.

What is a science scenario?

A science scenario contains text, graphics, charts, and/or tables, and uses these elements to describe the results of a class project, an experiment, or other similar research. Students use the information found in a science scenario to answer multiple-choice questions.

How are the written responses to open-ended items scored?

The written responses for science open-ended items are scored by evaluators trained in applying a pre-determined scoring system. In science, scores are based on content only. Spelling and punctuation are not included as part of the scoring process.

What is assessed in science?

The science assessment addresses the four major reporting categories: The Nature of Science, Biological Sciences, Physical Sciences, and Earth and Space Sciences. The proportion of items devoted to each reporting category varies within a grade level. Each reporting category includes certain Assessment Anchors and Eligible Content.