

Frequently
Asked
Questions

Information for Parents or Guardians

Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA)

Reading & Mathematics Assessment, March 17–April 4, 2014
Writing Assessment, March 31–April 11, 2014
Science Assessment, April 28–May 9, 2014



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:

Reading & Mathematics – Grades 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8
Writing – Grades 5 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 READING & MATHEMATICS ASSESSMENTS (grades 3–8)

How long do the assessments take?

The entire reading and mathematics assessments take approximately six to seven 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 each of the reading and mathematics assessments. 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 three types of questions: multiple-choice, selected-response (reading only), and constructed-response. In a multiple-choice question, the correct answer is chosen from four options. Selected-response questions in reading have two parts, and students select one or more answers for each part. Constructed-response questions require students to compose their responses. These include open-ended questions in mathematics and short-answer questions in reading, as well as text-dependent analysis questions in reading. Short-answer questions require students to compose a brief response to support their answer, while open-ended questions generally require students to provide a greater level of detail in support of their answer (such as showing or describing the steps performed to complete a calculation). 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 reading and mathematics open-ended items are scored by evaluators trained in applying a pre-determined scoring system. In mathematics and reading, scores are based on content only. Spelling and punctuation are not included as part of the scoring process.

What is assessed in reading?

The reading assessment addresses two major reporting categories that encompass the reading process. Students read a number of passages from both fictional and nonfictional genres and respond to questions about these passages. By answering these questions, students indicate both their comprehension and reading skills and their analysis and interpretation of fictional and nonfictional text.

What is assessed in mathematics?

The mathematics assessment addresses five major reporting categories. The proportion of items in each reporting category varies by grade level. As a part of the assessment of Reporting Category A, Numbers and Operations, students 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 to explain in writing how they solved the problems.

INFORMATION ABOUT THE WRITING ASSESSMENT (grades 5 and 8)

How long does the assessment take?

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

What does the assessment include?

The writing assessment consists of twelve multiple-choice revising and editing questions and two writing prompts for grade 5 and grade 8. Some portions of the assessment will be the same for all students, and some will consist of different groups of questions or writing prompts. All questions and writing prompts were written to align with Pennsylvania's Academic Standards for Writing.

What types of questions are on the assessments?

Students respond to two types of questions: multiple-choice and writing prompts. In a multiple-choice question, the correct answer is chosen from the four presented options, while writing prompts require students to compose their responses.

How are the written responses evaluated?

Trained evaluators score the student's response for composition (focus, content development, organization, and style) using approved scoring

guidelines. Additionally, a second set of evaluators score the student's response for conventions (sentence formation, grammar, usage, spelling, and punctuation). Composition and conventions scores are combined to indicate the student's level of proficiency.

What is assessed in writing?

The writing assessment provides a direct performance measure of students' abilities to develop, organize, and express their ideas in a variety of writing situations. The writing assessment is intended to evaluate performances of individual students, to provide data about the school's writing program, and to serve as a check of the school's local assessment of writing.

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.