

2005-06 PSSA Results Frequently Asked Questions

What is the PSSA?

The PSSA (Pennsylvania System of Schools Assessment) is a standards-based assessment administered in all Pennsylvania public schools. There are three content-specific assessments including reading, math and writing.

Which grades take the PSSA?

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requires annually testing in reading and math for all students in grades 3-8 and one high school grade (11th grade in Pennsylvania), beginning no later than the 2005-06 school year.

The PSSA reading and math assessment has been given annually in grades 5, 8, and 11 since 1998. The grade 3 PSSA reading and math assessment was first administered in 2004-05, and grades 4, 6, and 7 were first added in 2005-06.

The writing PSSA is given in grades 5, 8 and 11 about a month earlier than the reading and math tests. A new writing test was administered for the first time in 2006, so the results aren't comparable to previous results.

What do PSSA scores mean?

Students are identified as performing in one of four levels: **advanced**, **proficient**, **basic** and **below basic**. The goal is for all students to be proficient or advanced – meaning that they have mastered Pennsylvania's assessment anchor content standards at their grade level. Individual student scores, provided only to their respective schools and to their families, can be used to assist teachers in identifying students who may be in need of additional educational opportunities, and school scores provide information to schools and districts for curriculum and instruction improvement discussions and planning.

The four performance levels are broadly defined as:

Advanced – This level reflects superior academic performance. Advanced work indicates an in-depth understanding and exemplary display of the skills included in the Pennsylvania Academic Content Standards.

Proficient - Proficiency reflects satisfactory academic performance. Proficient work indicates a solid understanding and adequate display of the skills included in the Pennsylvania Academic Content Standards.

Basic – This level reflects marginal academic performance. Basic work indicates a partial understanding and limited display of the skills included in the Pennsylvania Academic Content Standards. This work is approaching satisfactory performance, but has not been reached. There is a need for additional instructional opportunities and/or increased student academic commitment to achieve the proficient level.

Below Basic – The lowest level reflects inadequate academic performance. Below basic work indicates little understanding and minimal display of the skills included in the Pennsylvania Academic Content Standards. There is a major need for additional instructional opportunities and/or increased student academic commitment to achieve the proficient level.

Do students have to pass the PSSA in order to graduate?

Students must demonstrate proficiency in reading and math in order to earn a high school diploma, but whether or not to require proficiency on the PSSA to graduate is a local decision. Districts may choose to use an alternative form of assessment to demonstrate proficiency for graduation requirements.

What are cut scores and how are they used?

Cut scores are the points on the range of scaled scores that identify the difference between performance levels. The cut scores define the range of scores that fall into a single performance category.

Will any new subjects be added to the PSSA?

In accordance with NCLB, Pennsylvania will be implementing a new science test for grades 4, 8 and 11, which won't officially begin until Spring 2008 – the exact dates are not yet available. NCLB requires a science assessment in one grade per elementary, middle, and high school level.

There is a voluntary field-test of the science test in Spring 2007 as part of the 2-3 year development of new tests. The development process involves various groups of educators and experts to ensure the tests are fair and non-biased. The field-test will allow us to evaluate and improve the test in preparation for the next year.

There are no plans to implement any new subject assessments or expansion of grades tested without any new requirements from the US Department of Education (USDE).

How long do the assessments take?

The reading and math tests take about two and a half to three hours each, not including time needed for teacher administration of the tests. The writing test takes approximately two and a half hours – one hour for each writing prompt – and another 20 minutes for the multiple choice portion. Tests are not timed, but suggested times are given for planning purposes.

How many students are taking the PSSA?

Approximately 140,000-150,000 students per grade level in 3-8 and 11th grade took the math and reading PSSAs - that's somewhere between 980,000 to 1,050,000 students, total.

How much did PDE spend on PSSA development, administration, and scoring (including AYP calculation)?

\$32.7 million total, which includes the development of the new tests for grades 4, 6 and 7

as well as the overall administering, scoring, and publishing of the PSSAs and AYP calculations. Last year's cost was \$29.9 million.

Are the tests all given at the same time?

In 2006, the math and reading tests were administered during the March 20-31 testing window. It's up to the schools to decide which days to test. The writing test was given during February 13-24.

What else is new this year?

Besides the new math and reading tests for grades 4, 6 and 7, and the upcoming science portion starting in 2008, there are some other new aspects to the PSSAs this year.

The writing test was administered for the first time in grades 5 and 8 and includes both multiple choice items as well as writing prompts.