



COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

September 2015

Dear Parent or Guardian,

Last April, a new Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) was administered in your child's classroom in English Language Arts and Mathematics. The new assessment was developed to meet the more challenging demands of the PA Core Standards, which were adopted in 2013 to better prepare students to be successful in college, postsecondary training, or in the 21st century work force.

The tests' more rigorous standards included more complex, multi-part questions, and required more thoughtful reasoning by students. It is likely that your child's scores are lower than in years past, this reflects the fact that they are being measured by a different assessment.

The Spring 2015 PSSA is the first year in the transition to the PA Core. Successful alignment to these new standards requires time, curriculum development and resources; therefore a change in your student's score should not be interpreted as a decline in their learning or in their teacher's performance.

The scores represent a snapshot in time and are meant to determine a baseline for measuring future growth. Comparing your student's scores and level of performance on the new assessment with those from previous years is not a valid comparison and may not provide an accurate depiction of their learning. The Department of Education anticipates that as students and teachers become more familiar with the new standards and additional resources are directed to classrooms, students' scores should steadily rise.

Schools have been working hard to update curriculum and provide the best education possible for your child, with the ultimate goal of student success. And while standardized tests can be useful benchmarks for growth, they are not the sole indicator of student achievement.

Your contribution to your child's education is critical, and I hope that the Department of Education, the commonwealth's schools, and families can all work together to educate and prepare Pennsylvania's next generation for postsecondary success.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Pedro Rivera".

Pedro A. Rivera
Secretary of Education

For additional information about the PSSA, including Performance Level Descriptors for ELA and Math, visit PDE's website at www.education.pa.gov and click on the "PSSA Information" tab.

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY

333 Market Street | Harrisburg, PA 17126-0333 | 717.787.5820 | Fax 717.787.7222 | www.education.pa.gov

Five Key Points Parents Should Know About the New PSSA

1. This past spring a new PSSA was administered in Pennsylvania's classrooms, grades 3 through 8, in English Language Arts and Mathematics. This assessment was the first PSSA to be fully-aligned to the more rigorous PA Core Standards, which the State Board of Education adopted in fall 2013. The PA Core Standards are intended to better prepare commonwealth students for college and career readiness when they graduate.
2. A decline in your student's performance level does not indicate that he/she is learning less. Transitions take time, including curriculum development and resources, and the 2014-15 school year was only year one of the new assessment. It is not useful to directly compare students' scores on the new assessment to students' scores from previous assessments because they are aligned to different standards. The results on the 2015 test are a snapshot in time and will set a benchmark for future academic growth.
3. The process of developing new standards and scaling scores was undertaken with thoroughness and thoughtfulness by a committee of Pennsylvania educators. As students and teachers become more familiar with the new standards, and more resources are directed at transitioning to the new standards, students will experience steady academic growth.
4. Results on standardized tests are not the sole indicator of student achievement. Students have different strengths and flourish in different ways. It is important to evaluate students in a holistic manner, using a variety of performance measures.
5. You can help your child(ren) grow academically by reviewing their PSSA results with them and by continuing to encourage them to do their best in school.

When Parents Receive Test Scores: Talking to Your Student

This past spring, a new PSSA was administered in Pennsylvania's classrooms, grades 3 through 8, in English Language Arts and Mathematics. This assessment was the first PSSA to be fully-aligned to the more rigorous PA Core Standards, which the State Board of Education adopted in September 2013.

These new standards are aimed at better preparing Pennsylvania students for success after high school, specifically to be college or career ready when they graduate. It is important to remember, and to explain to students, that the transition to the new, more rigorous standards will take time. This year's results are meant to establish a baseline to measure future growth, and that student performance will grow as they become more familiar with the new standards.

It is also important to help your student understand how he or she performed on the assessments – both strengths and opportunities for improvement.

Some key points you may want to emphasize with your student as you look at their scores together:

- The standards for learning have changed. They are more demanding and set higher expectations.
- The test has changed. The test questions are aligned to the standards, and many of the questions are more complex than in previous years.
- Look at the test scores together. Ask your child to share how he or she feels about the tests and whether the questions were challenging.
- Explain to your student if test scores were not as high as expected, to not be discouraged. Remember that the test was harder this year, and with time and continued effort on your part, he or she will be able to meet new expectations.
- Parents and teachers can help students think about what they will need to do to be successful while they are in school and after high school. Remember that these tests help schools prepare students for life after graduation. Whether there are a few years until a student graduates from high school or many, these tests help schools and teachers make sure you are ready for whatever direction you choose.
- Encourage your student to continue to work hard in school, and let the teacher know when he or she needs help.