PSSA: The Pennsylvania System of School Assessment

What is the PSSA?

The Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) is a standards-based assessment which provides students, parents, educators, and citizens with an understanding of student and school performance related to the attainment of proficiency of the academic standards. These standards in English Language Arts, Mathematics, and Science identify what a student should know and be able to do at varying grade levels. Pennsylvania students in Grades 3 through 8 are assessed in English Language Arts and Math, and Pennsylvania students in Grades 5 and 8 are assessed in Science.

When will my child take the PSSA?

The PSSA is administered on an annual basis, with testing windows typically open in April and May. The calendar for the PSSA testing windows can be found here. You should consult SDP's Assessment Calendar as well as your child's school calendar for specific dates when the PSSAs will be administered at their school.

What do teachers do with my child's PSSA results?

Individual student scores, provided only to your child's school, can be used to assist teachers in identifying your child's strengths and weaknesses. This then allows teachers to personalize your child's instruction to best support their growth. PSSA scores also provide information to schools and districts that can support improvement and planning discussions around curriculum and instruction.

What types of questions are asked on the PSSA?

For the ELA PSSA, the vast majority of test items are Multiple-Choice questions. However, there is also a writing component for all grade levels. 3rd Grade students are asked to respond to three Short-Answer prompts, while 4th-8th Grade students are asked to respond to two Text Dependent Analysis prompts. Short-Answer and Text Dependent Analysis responses are scored using a rubric.

For the Math and Science PSSAs, all students regardless of grade-level are asked a mix of Multiple-Choice questions and Open-Ended questions. Open-Ended responses are scored using a rubric.

For more information on this topic, please consult the Math, ELA, and Science test design documents.

What types of scores are reported on the PSSA?

For all three tested subject areas, students receive a raw score, a scale score and a performance tier rating (Below Basic, Basic, Proficient, or Advanced) that is associated with a specific scale score range. The scale score associated with each performance tier differs by grade-level and subject area. For a deeper breakdown, you can consult the Pennsylvania Department of Education's Scale Score Ranges Document.

Additionally, the Pennsylvania Department of Education provides schools with reports on individual student performance by Reporting Category and Assessment Anchor. Assessment Anchors represent categories of subject matter (skills and concepts) that anchor the content of the PSSA.

For the ELA PSSA, there are four Assessment Anchors that are the same across Grades 3-8: Key Ideas & Details, Craft & Structure, Vocabulary, and Language. Grades 4-8 have one additional Assessment Anchor: Text Dependent Analysis.

For the Math PSSA, the Assessment Anchors differ by grade-band. For Grades 3-5, the Assessment Anchors are: Numbers & Operations in Base Ten, Fractions, Operations & Algebraic Thinking, Geometry, and Measurement & Data. For Grades 6-7, the Assessment Anchors are: The Number System, Ratios & Proportional Relationships, Expressions & Equations, Geometry, and Statistics and Probability. For 8th grade, the Assessment Anchors are: The Number System, Functions, Expressions & Equations, Geometry, and Statistics and Probability.

What does it mean to be Below Basic, Basic, Proficient, or Advanced?

The Pennsylvania Department of Education has performance level descriptors for both Math and ELA available on their website.

For the Science PSSA, the Assessment Anchors are the same for both 4th grade and 8th grade. There are several Assessment Anchors, which can be grouped more neatly into the following Reporting Categories: The Nature of Science, Biological Sciences, Physical Sciences, and Earth & Space Sciences.

Is the PSSA timed?

The PSSA is not timed, but students cannot complete a section over multiple days. If students start a section on a Monday, they cannot finish that section on Tuesday. For ELA, the assessment is broken into three sections. For Math and Science, the assessment is broken into two sections. The estimated time to complete a section of the PSSA varies depending on the types of questions asked in each particular section. For more information on this topic, including the types of questions asked on each section and the estimated time to complete each section, please consult the Math, ELA, and Science test design documents.

Does the PSSA affect my child's grade?

This test does not affect students' grades.

How does my child take the PSSA?

The PSSA is typically taken via pencil and paper; however, there are also online versions of the assessment. Regardless of which version your child is taking, all students must take the PSSA in person at their school.

Where can I find the results from the PSSA?

Schools receive two paper copies of Individual Student Reports each Fall. You can ask your child's school for a hard copy of their Individual Student Report. Results are also posted in the Parent Portal under the Standardized Test section of the Student Profile.

Who can I contact with further questions about the PSSA?

If you have further questions about the PSSA, it is recommended that you reach out to your child's school. The contact information for your child's school can be obtained from SDP's new School Profiles website.

Where can I find additional information on the PSSA?

School District of Philadelphia's Office of Assessment:
https://www.philasd.org/research/#assessmentsera

Pennsylvania Department of Education's PSSA homepage: https://www.education.pa.gov/K-12/Assessment%20and%20Accountability/PSSA/Pages/default.aspx