

Frequently Asked Questions about the new 2014-2015 PSSA results

Over the summer of 2015, the PSSA results from the 2014-15 school year were released with scores that are significantly different than the previous year. Read about the changes.

PSSA scores dropped statewide. What happened?

In March of 2014, as part of a nationwide movement to create new standards (called the Common Core), the PA Board of Education replaced PA's academic standards with new "PA Core Standards," the first revision in 10 years. These are very rigorous standards, which significantly changed the content that students in PA are to learn in public schools.

At the end of the 2014-2015 school year, Pennsylvania students in grades 3-8 took new PSSA tests that were based solely on the new PA Core Standards. The *2014 PSSAs are very different from the PSSAs that students had taken in previous years.* The format and content of the tests were new and **some content was tested a full grade or more earlier than on previous PSSAs.**

Statewide, scores on the new PSSA s declined sharply. On average, in grades 3-8, the number of students scoring Advanced or Proficient dropped by 9.4% in Language Arts and by 35.4% in Math.

Should the results of the 2014 PSSAs be compared with the results of PSSAs from previous years?

Absolutely not. With the 2014 PSSA tests, Pennsylvania hit a kind of "reset button" on test results for what the standards are and what students should know. **Scores from the 2014-2015 should be used as a new baseline from which future student achievement can be measured.**

What does the decline in test scores tell us about PA's students and schools? Do these new scores prove that schools in Pennsylvania are really not doing well?

The tests have changed, not Pennsylvania's students and schools. The scores demonstrate that the new tests are more rigorous, and set to measure different standards than previous PSSAs because they contain new content. The scores also indicate that teachers and schools need time and resources to adapt and update the curriculum they are using to align to new standards. Students will need time and updated instructional materials in order to learn the new content on the tests and to develop further the problem solving and critical thinking skills that these tests require. These updates can't happen overnight.

Are there costs involved with the implementation of the new PA Core Standards?

Yes. The costs for school districts to implement the PA Core Standards are significant. Educators will need to rewrite and realign their curriculum in order to teach the content in the new PA Core Standards. They will also need new textbooks and materials that are aligned to these standards. In addition, teachers will need professional development and training in order to deepen their content knowledge and adapt their instructional methods.

Did the state provide additional funding to help school districts with the substantial costs of implementing the new PA Core Standards?

No. The state of Pennsylvania has not provided any additional funding to help school districts implement the new PA Core Standards. In fact, the PA Core Standards were adopted during a time when many school districts were facing significant budget shortfalls and lost at least 20,000 educational professionals due to a lack of adequate funding.

If the state is going to raise standards and measure kids, then the state must ensure that students have access to what they need to meet these new standards. Students need to be in classrooms with teachers who have had an

opportunity to work with curriculum that was developed to the new PA Core Standards and they need materials and resources that are current and aligned with the standards.

How should I talk to my child about the new test, especially if her achievement level dropped?

It can be very discouraging to receive a score on a test that is disappointing. Students need to hear that it was the test that changed, not them. The 2014 PSSAs were more difficult than previous PSSAs and contain content that students *may not have even learned in school yet*. As students learn more of the new content in school and develop the skills necessary for the test, they should expect to see their scores go up.

In addition, it is essential to give students a healthy perspective on the PSSAs in general. The scores on PSSAs reflect only a portion of what students know. The PSSAs are a snapshot of students' knowledge of specific standards in math, language arts, and science. Nothing more, nothing less. There are many skills and subjects not tested. Furthermore, in recent years, more questions are being raised about the disproportionate emphasis on tests. They may be a tool in the toolbox, but they should not be the only tool for measuring student success.

Are lower PSSA scores the result of budget cuts?

No. The test is different, and the drop in performance can be attributed to changes in the test and changes expectations about what is considered "advanced" and "proficient." However, budget cuts do have an impact on schools and teachers ability to train and prepare for new standards; to have new materials; to develop appropriate curriculum and lesson plans; and to evaluate what is working and make updates to instructional methods. So – budgets (schools having adequate resources) could have an impact on how well we do at preparing children for the new standards in the future.

What about School Performance Profiles?

Because this is a new test, aligned to new standards, this is a baseline year and it would be inappropriate to use these results to determine if a school is doing better or worse than it has in the past. This is "Year 1" in terms of getting data on how schools are doing at meeting the new standards. Pennsylvania received a waiver from the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) to pause the use of PSSA scores to calculate SPP scores for one year. The only schools that will receive SPP scores this year are schools that administered Keystone Exams.

What about evaluating teachers using these scores?

These results should not be used for teacher evaluations; it just wouldn't be fair. Furthermore, schools and teachers should be provided with time and materials to make changes to instruction. The USDE granted Pennsylvania a waiver to pause the use of PSSA scores in teacher and principal evaluations for one year. Student growth scores will continue to be used in these evaluations, but not PSSA results.

At the end of the day, what does this all mean?

High standards for all students in Pennsylvania's public schools are a good thing. Parents and community members should want students to graduate from high school with the knowledge and skills that they need in order to succeed in college or the 21st Century workforce.

These tests provide a new baseline level of student achievement. They show the academic performance of students before the new standards have kicked in and new instruction and content is delivered.

It is vital to understand that raising the bar that measures what students should know through the implementation of the new PA Core Standards is a process that will require time and a significant investment in resources. We must ensure that curriculum and instruction are up to date and students have had a chance to learn the new content before we can use this information in a meaningful way, and even then, standardized tests should only be one tool in a tool box of looking at learning.

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