

Part Six: Frequently Asked Questions about the PSSA

Q: What is the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA)?

A: The PSSA is a state assessment in Mathematics, Reading, Writing, and Science given each year to Pennsylvania’s public school students to measure students’ achievement of the Pennsylvania Assessment Anchor Content Standards.

Q: Who creates/develops the assessment?

A: A number of different groups are involved in the development of the PSSA. The items on the assessment have been developed by testing contractors and are reviewed and revised by the Pennsylvania Department of Education and Pennsylvania teachers. A Technical Advisory Committee (TAC), composed of some of the leading assessment experts in the country, assists in the format of the assessment.

Q: How were items chosen for the PSSA?

A: All items were written by experienced content experts, field-tested by Pennsylvania students, and scored by teams of experienced trained readers with at least a four-year degree and a strong content-specific background. All items have been reviewed by committees of Pennsylvania teachers to determine their appropriateness for each grade level. Items were chosen based on professional experience and knowledge of the most commonly made mistakes by students at each level.

Q: Who must take the assessment?

A: Mathematics and Reading Assessments are administered to all public school students in grades 3–8 and 11; the Writing Assessment is administered to all public school students in grades 5, 8, and 11. The Science Assessment is administered to all public school students in grades 4, 8, and 11. Private school students may participate if the private school volunteers to participate. Home-schooled students may also volunteer to participate. Parents of home-schooled children should contact the local district to arrange for inclusion in the testing.

Q: Can a parent or guardian opt out a child from taking the PSSA?

A: Yes, a parent or guardian may opt out his/her child from taking the PSSA for religious reasons. After review of the PSSA, if a parent or guardian chooses to opt his/her child out of participation in the PSSA because of a conflict with religious belief, the parent or guardian must make such a request in writing to the district superintendent.

Q: What are the consequences of not participating in the assessment?

A: Because the PSSA is designed to measure a student’s level of achievement of the Academic Standards as identified by the Assessment Anchor Content Standards, non-participation prevents the student from seeing how well he/she has achieved the Anchors. Also, non-participation affects a school’s overall results. If a significant percentage of students fail to participate in the assessment, a true picture of the school will not be presented. Finally, federal legislation makes it mandatory for each school to have at least 95% of its population participate in the state assessment, or it will fail to make adequate yearly progress (AYP).

Q: Must special education students participate in the assessment?

A: Yes, all students are required to participate. Students who have significant cognitive disabilities must participate in an alternate assessment (PASA). Special education students participating in the regular assessment must be provided accommodations in the environment as stipulated under Chapter 14 and 15 of 22 PA Code regarding their instruction. For additional information, see the [2008-2009 Accommodations Guidelines](#). Additional information about alternate assessments is available from the I.U. Special Education Division, Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN), and the PDE Bureau of Special Education.

Q: Must English Language Learner (ELL) students participate in the assessment?

A: The U.S. Department of Education released guidance on participation of ELL students in state assessments. This flexibility will allow ELL students in their first year of enrollment in U.S. schools, not including Puerto Rico, the option of taking the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) Reading assessment. If students choose to participate, their performance level results will not be included in the AYP calculations for the school/district. All ELL students are still required to participate in the Mathematics and Science assessments, with accommodations if appropriate. However, the Mathematics (Science is not part of AYP) scores of ELL students in their first year of enrollment in U.S. schools, not including Puerto Rico, will not be used to determine AYP status. ELLs in their first year of enrollment in U.S. schools are not required to take the PSSA Writing test, but they may choose to do so. All ELLs must take the PSSA Science assessment. For additional information, see the 2008-2009 Accommodations Guidelines for English Language Learners.

Q: Must students perform at a certain level on the PSSA to graduate?

A: Section 4.24 of the Pennsylvania School Code requires that students be proficient in the Mathematics, Reading, and Writing Academic Standards to graduate; however, the state allows each school district to determine how a child demonstrates proficiency, either using the PSSA or using a local assessment aligned with the Academic Standards and the PSSA. If a district chooses the PSSA as the instrument to demonstrate proficiency, a child will be accountable to the graduation requirements of that district.

Q: What is meant by “proficient”?

A: Pennsylvania has identified four levels of performance: The **Advanced** Level reflects superior academic performance. Advanced work indicates an in-depth understanding and exemplary display of the skills included in the Assessment Anchors. The **Proficient** Level reflects satisfactory academic performance. Proficient work indicates a solid understanding and adequate display of the skills included in the Assessment Anchors. The **Basic** Level reflects marginal academic performance. Basic work indicates a partial understanding and limited display of the skills included in the Assessment Anchors. This work is approaching but not reaching satisfactory performance. There is a need for additional instructional opportunities and/or increased student academic commitment to achieve the Proficient Level. The **Below Basic** Level reflects inadequate academic performance. Below Basic

work indicates little understanding and minimal display of the skills included in the Assessment Anchors. There is a major need for additional instructional opportunities and/or increased student academic commitment to achieve the Proficient Level.

Q: How were performance levels developed?

A: The Pennsylvania Department of Education used the statistical standard-setting procedure called the Modified Bookmark Method. Pennsylvania teachers, higher education representatives, and members of educational and assessment organizations, such as the National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment (NCIEA), examined the PSSA booklets with questions ordered from easiest to hardest. Based on their experience in determining students' achievements at different levels, determinations were made of advanced, proficient, basic, and below basic by placing a "bookmark" at the point in the booklet that best represented each level.

Q: Where can I obtain more information on the PSSA?

A: From the PDE website: http://www.pde.state.pa.us/a_and_t (note the underscore characters).

Q: What are Assessment Anchor Content Standards?

A: The [Assessment Anchor Content Standards](#) (often referred to as "Assessment Anchors") clarify the standards assessed on the PSSA and can be used by educators to help prepare their students for the PSSA. The metaphor of an "anchor" is used to signal that the Assessment Anchor Content Standards anchor the state assessment system and the curriculum/instructional practices in schools.

Q: Why do we need Assessment Anchor Content Standards if we already have the Pennsylvania Standards?

A: Since 1999, teachers across the Commonwealth have been using a set of state Academic Standards to develop curriculum and instructional materials. Likewise, the Department and teacher committees have been using the standards to develop the state assessments. The Assessment Anchor Content Standards target a specific band of Academic Standards, clarifying the relation of the PSSA to the Academic Standards.

Q: Do the Assessment Anchor Content Standards replace the Pennsylvania Academic Standards?

A: No. The Assessment Anchor Content Standards do not replace the Academic Standards (the Standards). All teachers are still required to teach all of the Standards per Chapter 4 Regulations and use local assessments to measure student progress. The Anchors simply clarify which Standards are assessed on the PSSA.

Q: Will teachers teach only the Assessment Anchor Content Standards and ignore other knowledge and skills?

A: The Assessment Anchor Content Standards were written with the intent of having interdisciplinary discussions about how Mathematics and Reading Assessment Anchors can be taught in Science, Social Studies, the Arts and other content areas. The intent of the Assessment Anchors is not to narrow the curriculum, but to communicate the essential

skills and knowledge in Reading and Mathematics (and Science and Writing) that can be taught across the curriculum. Another intent is to identify the Academic Standards that are eligible for assessment via the PSSA, as the Standards cover more skills and knowledge than can be covered by the Anchors.

Q: How were the Assessment Anchor Content Standards selected, and by whom?

A: The Department of Education identified the Assessment Anchor Content Standards based on the recommendations of teachers serving on the Mathematics, Reading, and Science Assessment Advisory Committees and other curriculum experts. The Department also looked to national organizations (i.e., NCTM, NCTE, NSTA, and NAEP) and other external groups for input. Seven criteria were used for the development of the Assessment Anchors. The Anchors had to be:

- **Clear:** The Anchors need to clarify which standards are assessed on the PSSA in an easy to read and user friendly format.
- **Focused:** Not all of the instructional Academic Standards can be assessed on a large-scale state assessment. Rather than have teachers “guess” which standards are most critical, the Anchors identify a core set of content standards that could reasonably be assessed on a large-scale assessment.
- **Aligned:** The focus is on helping students achieve the state’s Academic Standards. The Anchors align directly to the state’s Academic Standards in Mathematics, Reading, Science and Technology, and Environment and Ecology and simply clarify those Standards.
- **Grade Appropriate:** The Anchors provide clear examples of skills and knowledge that should be learned at the different grade levels that will be assessed on state tests.
- **Organized to Support a Curricular Flow:** In Mathematics and Reading rather than simply identifying Anchors in the grades for which the state has Academic Standards, Assessment Anchor Content Standards were developed in Grades 3 through 8 and grade 11 to encourage a curricular spiral that builds each year to the next.
- **Rigorous:** The rigor of the state standards is maintained through the Anchors. In addition, the State will continue to use open-ended items on the PSSA to assess higher order reasoning and problem solving skills.
- **Manageable:** The Anchors identify a set of standards that could be taught in a manageable way before the spring administration of the PSSA.

Q: How are the Assessment Anchor Content Standards organized?

A: The Assessment Anchor Content Standards are available in grades 3 through 8 and grade 11 in Mathematics and in Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening. The Assessment Anchor Content Standards are available in Science in grades 4, 8 and 11. In these documents you will find the following:

- **Reporting Category:** The Assessment Anchor Content Standards are organized by Reporting Categories. The Reporting Category appears at the very top of each page. Reporting Categories are important because individual student scores will be reported at this level. District and school reports may include reports by Assessment Anchor Content

Standards if there are enough questions on the PSSA to warrant a valid score by the broad Anchor statement.

- **Assessment Anchor Content Standard:** The Assessment Anchor Content Standard appears in the shaded bar across the top of the page. (*It is called the “Assessment Anchor” in the document*). The Assessment Anchor document is organized in outline form, with the main concept shaded in gray. Just beneath, in the left-hand column, are more specific descriptors. Eligible Content appears to the right of the descriptors and can be used for instructional purposes. Both the concept in the shaded gray area and the descriptors (which appear one per page) are part of the Assessment Anchor Content Standard.
- **References:** Below each specific descriptor of the Assessment Anchor is a reference in italics. This reference relates to the PA Academic Standards and helps to link the Assessment Anchor Content Standards back to the Academic Standards.
- **Eligible Content:** The column on the right-hand side of the page underneath each Assessment Anchor is the Eligible Content. Think of this data as an “assessment limit” with the purpose to help teachers identify how deeply they need to cover an Assessment Anchor and/or the range of the content they should teach to best prepare their students for the PSSA. Not all of the Eligible Content is assessed on the PSSA each year, but it shows the range of knowledge from which the test is designed.

Q: How can teachers, schools, and districts use the Assessment Anchor Content Standards?

A: The Assessment Anchor Content Standards can help focus teaching and learning because they are clear, manageable and closely aligned to the PSSA. Teachers and administrators will be better informed about which standards will be assessed on state tests. The Assessment Anchor Content Standards should be used in combination with the Assessment Handbooks that include the test blueprints and *Item and Scoring Samplers* from the PSSA. With this degree of information, teachers can more easily embed these skills and knowledge in the larger curriculum. For example, *reading for inference* is a skill that all students at any level need to learn and practice. Staff can share the responsibility for teaching this skill in English, as well as other areas in the curriculum. Even elective and support staff can “adopt” an Assessment Anchor. In this way, an entire school and community can teach and reinforce these critical Reading, Mathematics and Science standards.

Q: What is the difference between the Assessment Anchor Content Standards and “anchor papers”?

A: Anchor papers are not the same as the Assessment Anchor Content Standards. To score open-ended items on the PSSA, Pennsylvania educators read a sampling of the student responses on the open-ended items and try to identify responses or “papers” that exemplify the different score points on the scoring guideline. These responses are called “anchor papers” because they “anchor” the scoring process. Once teachers reach consensus on the anchor papers, trained scorers use the anchor papers to score all of the open-ended

responses on the PSSA. When the Department releases open-ended items with student work, the anchor papers are often released with the items.

Q: Will the Assessment Anchor Content Standards ever be revised or changed?

A: The Assessment Anchor Content Standards are reviewed periodically to ensure that they represent the most important skills and knowledge that should be assessed on the PSSA. The current Assessment Anchor Content Standards that will be used in the 2008-2009 operational assessment are available on the PDE website.

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