

Introduction

Pennsylvania is transitioning to new, more challenging standards in mathematics and English language arts. These new Pennsylvania Core Standards are designed to improve student preparation for college and career.

Progress in meeting standards is measured by state tests. At the elementary and middle level, revised PSSAs aligned to the PA Core Standards will be administered in 2015. At the secondary level, however, Keystone Exams were utilized for accountability for the first time in 2013 as the measure of proficiency. These exams are based on PA Core Standards and reflect more challenging content and a higher degree of rigor.

This overview addresses some of the changes that have occurred and their implications on schools' academic performance.

PA Core Standards: More Rigor

With State Board approval of the revised Chapter 4 regulations, the transition from Pennsylvania's Academic Standards to the more rigorous Pennsylvania Core Standards, schools have been reviewing and rewriting their curriculum to align with the new standards. As well as rewriting curriculum, classroom instruction requires instructional shifts to address the demands of the new standards.

Testing to Measure Progress — Keystone Exams

At the secondary level, the transition from the legacy Academic Standards to the PA Core Standards began with the administration of the Keystone Exams in Algebra I, Biology, and Literature for accountability in 2012-2013. The Keystone Exams are end-of-course assessments designed to assess proficiency in various subjects. These new assessments are aligned to the content and rigor of PA Core Standards and generally reflect a higher degree of rigor. Unlike the previously administered Grade 11 math and reading PSSAs, the Keystone Exams are course specific, and students take the tests after completing the Keystone course. Thus, the exams are administered close to instruction rather than a predetermined grade level.

As a result of the transition to end-of-course Keystone Exams, schools may see a decline in academic achievement proficiency. While both the former PSSAs and the Keystone Exams utilize the Below Basic/Basic/Proficient/Advanced descriptors to define levels of proficiency, comparing the 2012 Grade 11 PSSA proficiency levels with 2013 Keystone Exam proficiency levels, the tests are very different:

- Different Standards – The Keystone Exams are aligned to the PA Core Standards and are reflective of content much different than the PSSAs – content designed to verify that students are on the pathway to college and career readiness.
 - The Algebra I Keystone Exam replaced the grade 11 Math PSSA and assesses concepts of algebra rather than general math principles.
 - The Literature Keystone Exam replaced the grade 11 reading PSSA and assesses analysis of fiction and non-fiction while the grade 11 PSSA leaned toward an emphasis on comprehension and reading skills.
- Rigor – The Keystone Exams support the rigor of the state standards by assessing higher-order and reasoning skills – a higher degree than the previous PSSAs.

In addition to the Algebra I and Literature Keystone Exams and their emphasis on higher standards and increased rigor, there are several other factors to consider when evaluating academic performance scores:

- Biology Keystone Exam - The addition of a Keystone Exam in Biology adds yet another rigorous assessment at the secondary level. This science exam is one of the measures of academic achievement in the School Performance Profile – a content area not previously used in the NCLB accountability system.
- Elimination of Grade 11 PSSA Writing - With the elimination of the PSSA Writing at grade 11, academic achievement no longer includes a writing score at the high school level (PSSA writing assessments did occur at grades 5 and 8).
- Grade 11 Cohort- Calculations to determine proficiency in 2013 at the secondary level were based upon the best banked Keystone Exam scores (by module) for grade 11 students. While the Keystone Exams are designed as end-of-course assessments, many students taking Keystone Exams in 2013 were not actually enrolled in the Keystone course. The transition to Keystone Exams for accountability required testing of all students in grade 11 regardless of their Keystone course status.
- Elimination of PSSA-M – Based upon individual IEPs, students with disabilities took a modified PSSA. Effective the 2012-2013 school year, the PSSA-Modified was no longer an option for students with IEPs.
- Curriculum Alignment – In the first year of Keystone Exams, LEAs aligned curriculum to Keystone Exam standards; however, transition to a more challenging set of standards is demanding and as data analysis dictates, courses may need to be adjusted to ensure tight alignment to the assessments.

Testing to Measure Progress — PSSA

In the 2012-2013 school year, the range of performance on PSSAs varied across the state. While some schools had static achievement, others reflect significant increases or decreases in PSSA performance. Nonetheless, overall state data shows a slight decline in PSSA scores on average. While the transition to PA Core Standards has not yet occurred in grades 3 through 8, the elimination of the PSSA-Modified has impacted proficiency levels.

While the PSSA scores for 2012-2013 reflect an overall decrease across the state, the variations in individual school districts vary widely.

An informal survey conducted by the Acting Secretary of Education's office pointed to multiple factors for the fluctuations in scoring. Those schools with increased scores generally acknowledged the following as factors that promoted higher scores:

- Strong leadership
- Effective use of data
- Staff development
- Strong curriculum aligned to PA Core Standards
- Before and after school tutoring
- Schoolwide focus on reading/math
- Restructuring of the school day regarding class time, teacher planning, etc.
- Utilization of SAS resources

For those schools where scores showed a decrease, the following factors were generally acknowledged:

- Lack of a solid curriculum
- Change in and/or lack of strong leadership
- Lack of funding for teachers, after school programs, and tutoring
- Test fatigue/test anxiety
- School closings
- Changing demographics/transience

As schools and districts analyze scores and trend data, factoring in strategies that are effective and determining what changes are necessary to increase student achievement will impact next year's performance.