



Five Key Points Policymakers Should Know About the 2015 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. On July 9, at a public meeting in Harrisburg, the State Board of Education approved "cut scores" for determining student performance levels on the 2015 PSSAs. The Secretary of Education recommended these cut scores, which a standards setting team of 58 Pennsylvania educators developed. These educators are subject matter experts, who represented different geographic regions, levels of teaching experience, and urban, suburban and rural communities. The team used a best practice methodology called "Bookmarking," and the process was undertaken with fidelity and reliability.
3. The heightened difficulty and increased rigor of the PA Core, and the limited time between final adoption and implementation of the new PSSA has resulted in fewer students scoring proficient or advanced. Other states have experienced similar results when making the transition to more rigorous standards. Transitioning to the new standards requires time to develop new curriculum, train teachers and provide resources to support the new curriculum.
4. It is not useful to directly compare students' scores on the new assessments to student scores from previous years because the 2015 PSSA measures different content than the previous years' PSSAs. In fact, some content is now being taught a full grade level earlier than under the previous Academic Content Standards. In addition to new content, the new assessment requires deeper knowledge, and stronger problem solving and critical thinking skills. PDE and educators are confident that as teachers and students become more familiar with the PA Core and more resources are directed toward teaching and learning the PA Core, student performance will steadily grow.
5. The Pennsylvania Value Added Assessment System (PVAAS), which contributes to Teacher Specific Data in Educator Effectiveness ratings and the School Performance Profile, will provide teachers and schools with reliable estimates of growth for the 2014-15 school year and PDE does not anticipate a reduction in the number of teachers or schools receiving favorable PVAAS scores for the year. PDE planned for this change in the PSSAs as related to PVAAS since 2012-13, and that plan ensured that growth reporting is based on the actual performance of Pennsylvania students during the current school year so as to avoid any impact from a changing assessment. Other states that have adopted more rigorous standards and had fewer students proficient or advanced have not experienced sweeping changes in their PVAAS equivalent measure.