

THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF PHILADELPHIA

OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT

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August 6, 2015

Dear School District of Philadelphia community:

I am writing today to share some information about our preliminary results on the new PSSA tests given to our 3rd through 8th grade students last school year. The new 2015 tests were very different from the tests given in 2014. The new 2015 tests were based on the rigorous PA Core Standards, which are the knowledge and skills the State Board of Education has identified as what Pennsylvania students need to be ready for college and career.

Not surprisingly -- given the more rigorous standards and skills assessed -- preliminary results show that across Pennsylvania fewer students scored proficient or advanced in both English Language Arts and Mathematics on the new PSSAs. Our performance on the new PSSAs mirrors these statewide trends.

In considering these results, some important points we should bear in mind are:

1. Declines in students' performance levels on the new PSSAs **do not** indicate that students are learning less. The new tests are based on different, more challenging content and skills and cannot support an "apples to apples" comparison with results on the old tests. We know that students and teachers are working hard; that there are multiple ways to measure our students' knowledge and mastery of skills; and that all of our students have the ability to grow academically.
2. We know that this kind of significant transition will take time and requires investments in teacher training, curricular materials, student tutoring, and other supports. We are still in the process of aligning our curriculum and resources to meet the rigorous new Standards. The results from last year are a new baseline to build off as we seek to ensure that all of our students have access to opportunity and are college- and career-ready.
3. We plan to review and make any needed adjustments to our high school admission standards -- which already take into account a range of factors and performance over time -- to ensure that the move to new, more rigorous PSSA tests does not limit students' access to opportunity.
4. While there may be concerns about the impact of the PSSA results on teachers' performance ratings, teachers will not necessarily see an impact. The growth measure in the state evaluation system looks at student growth compared to students statewide, and our performance mirrored statewide trends.

In a bright spot, despite having taken a harder and different test, almost 6,000 students in grades 3-8 moved from the bottom performance level (below basic) to the next highest level (basic) on the English Language Arts test.

Our performance on the 2014-15 Keystone exam in Literature also is cause for celebration. (The Keystone exams were already aligned to the rigorous PA Core Standards, so a year-to-year comparison is valid.) Our proficiency rate in Literature among first-time testers jumped 7 percentage points from the prior year and over three-quarters of our high schools saw an increase in Literature proficiency from the prior year.

The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) will release our final PSSA and Keystone results in the next month or so. Individual student reports will be sent by PDE to schools in mid-September and transmitted home to parents and guardians. In the meantime, PDE has prepared useful guidance for families, students, and educators about the new PSSAs and results (available at: <http://www.education.pa.gov/Pages/PSSA-Information.aspx#.VcOymhNViko>), which we will be posting on our website and translating.

We have embraced the PA Core Standards because they reflect the knowledge and skills needed for college and career readiness. We will continue to seek the needed funding to ensure that all of our students are prepared to meet the most current expectations of colleges and employers.

Thank you for your ongoing support of our students and schools.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "WRHite", is written over a faint, light-colored watermark of the same signature.

William R. Hite, Jr., Ed.D.

Five Key Points Parents Should Know About the New 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. A decline in your student's performance level does not indicate that he/she is learning less. Transitions take time, including curriculum development and resources, and the 2014-15 school year was only year one of the new assessment. It is not useful to directly compare students' scores on the new assessment to students' scores from previous assessments because they are aligned to different standards. The results on the 2015 test are a snapshot in time and will set a benchmark for future academic growth.
3. The process of developing new standards and scaling scores was undertaken with thoroughness and thoughtfulness by a committee of Pennsylvania educators. As students and teachers become more familiar with the new standards, and more resources are directed at transitioning to the new standards, students will experience steady academic growth.
4. Results on standardized tests are not the sole indicator of student achievement. Students have different strengths and flourish in different ways. It is important to evaluate students in a holistic manner, using a variety of performance measures.
5. You can help your child(ren) grow academically by reviewing their PSSA results with them and by continuing to encourage them to do their best in school.

When You Receive Test Scores: Talking to Your child

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 September 2013.

These new standards are aimed at better preparing Pennsylvania students for success after high school, specifically to be college or career ready when they graduate. It is important to remember, and to explain to your child, that the transition to the new, more rigorous standards will take time. This year's results are meant to establish a baseline to measure future growth, and you're your child's performance will grow as he or she becomes more familiar with the new standards.

It is also important to help your child understand how he or she performed on the assessments – both strengths and opportunities for improvement.

Some key points you may want to emphasize with your child as you look at his or her scores together:

- The standards for learning have changed. They are more demanding and set higher expectations.
- The test has changed. The test questions are aligned to the standards, and many of the questions are more complex than in previous years.
- Look at the test scores together. Ask your child to share how he or she feels about the tests and whether the questions were challenging.
- Explain to your child if test scores were not as high as expected, to not be discouraged. Remember that the test was harder this year, and with time and continued effort on your part, he or she will be able to meet new expectations.
- You and teachers can help your child think about what he or she will need to do to be successful while he or she is in school and after high school. Remember that these tests help schools prepare students for life after graduation. Whether there are a few years until a student graduates from high school or many, these tests help schools and teachers make sure he or she is ready for whatever direction he or she chooses.
- Encourage your child to continue to work hard in school, and let the teacher know when he or she needs help.