



The Every Student Succeeds Act: State and Federal Student Assessment Requirements

On December 10, 2015, President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) which reauthorizes the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) for four years and enacts significant changes from the previous iteration of the law, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Compared to NCLB, ESSA reduces federal intervention in many state education policies and programs and assigns substantial decision-making authority to states.

However, one area that remains unchanged in the new law is the federal requirement that states test students in prescribed subjects at specific grade levels. States may adopt student assessments in addition to those required by ESEA, and local education agencies (LEAs) also may adopt additional assessments that are not required by the state or federal government. However, ***the minimum federal assessment requirement has not changed with the passage of ESSA.***

Even though ESSA ensures that the current federal testing requirements continue for at least another four years,¹ concern has been growing among parents, educators, students, policymakers, and others about time spent administering student assessments. As concern has increased, so has the call for “fewer and smarter” standardized tests.”² This is in part a response to recent research demonstrating that American students take about 8 standardized assessments a year or 112 standardized assessments by graduation.³ Additional evidence suggests that these assessments take from 20 to 50 hours to administer each year, and students in tested grades spend an additional 110 hours each year simply preparing to take standardized tests.⁴

An important first step to reduce the time spent preparing for and administering standardized assessments is determining which assessments are being administered to students, where decisions regarding standardized assessment preparation and administration are made, and why decision makers have made them.

¹ ESSA reauthorizes the Elementary and Secondary Education Act for four years, until the end of 2019.

² See, for example, the United States Department of Education 2015 [Fact Sheet: Testing Action Plan](#).

³ See the Council of Great City Schools’ 2015 Report, [Student Testing in America’s Great City Schools](#).

⁴ See the American Federation of Teachers 2013 Report, [Testing More, Teaching Less](#)

What student assessments are required by federal law?

- ESEA requires all states to test all students annually in reading or language arts and mathematics in grades 3 through 8 and once in grades 10 to 12. ESEA also requires all students to be tested in science once in each of the following grade spans: 3 to 5, 6 to 9, and 10 to 12. Assessments must include appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities and English language learners. These assessments are required as a part of federal accountability provisions.
- ESEA requires all states to ensure that each LEA administers an annual assessment of English language proficiency for all English language learners in grades 3 through 8 and once in grades 10 to 12. The assessment must be aligned to the State’s English language proficiency standards. The English proficiency assessments are required as part of federal accountability provisions.
- ESEA requires all states and selected schools to participate in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The NAEP is administered to a sample of students, not to every student, in a state. Mathematics and reading assessments are administered every other year; other NAEP subject assessments are administered more intermittently. NAEP is often referred to as “The Nation’s Report Card.” It measures trends in national student performance over the past 30 years and allows student achievement comparisons across states.
- These federal assessment requirements began with the 2001 ESEA Reauthorization, called the No Child Left Behind Act (NLCB). ***The current version of ESEA, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), does nothing to reduce the number of required tests or the number of grades or content areas that must be tested.***

What student assessments are required by state law?

- In response to federal requirements for testing in grades 3 through 8 and in high school, Pennsylvania has developed The Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) and Keystone Exams. These exams must be administered to all students in grades 3 through 8 and once in grades 10 to 12 in English language arts and mathematics. The PSSA and Keystone Exams also measure student proficiency in science in grades 4, 8, and once in high school. The PSSA English language arts and mathematics assessments each take approximately 3 to 4 hours to complete. PDE estimates that each Keystone Exam takes 2 to 3 hours to complete, on average. These assessments are used for state and federal accountability purposes. The Keystone Exam also is intended as a high-stakes graduation exam.⁵
- Students who do not demonstrate proficiency on a Keystone Exam after two attempts may complete a “project based assessment” (PBA) that is developed by the state.⁶ The PBA is used to demonstrate individual student proficiency for the conferral of a high school diploma.
- Federal law allows, but does not require, a state to develop an alternative state assessment for students with the most severe cognitive disabilities. Pennsylvania has chosen to exercise this option and has developed the Pennsylvania Alternate System of Assessment (PASA). The PASA is designed for students who are unable to participate meaningfully in the PSSA, even with

⁵ Implementation of the Keystone Exam for high-stakes graduation purposes has been delayed until 2018-19.

⁶ The use of the Keystone Exam as a benchmark for participation in a project based assessment has been delayed until the 2018-19 school year.

accommodations. The purpose of the PASA is to measure student progress against state standards and to assist educators and LEAs in improving instruction for all children.⁷

- In response to federal requirements for testing English language proficiency among all English language learners, Pennsylvania annually administers the “Assessing Communication and Comprehension in English State to State for English Language Learners (ACCESS for ELLs)” assessment. The ACCESS is administered to determine English proficiency among English language learners. It also is required for federal accountability reporting.
- Except for the PASA which is allowed by federal law to meet the needs of students with the most severe cognitive disabilities, Pennsylvania only administers assessments that are already required by federal law. Pennsylvania does not mandate additional tests and would be restricted by federal law from reducing the grade levels or content areas covered by state assessments for students other than those with the most significant cognitive disabilities.

What other student assessments are administered in Pennsylvania?

LEAs may adopt any number of formative, summative, or diagnostic student assessments. These assessments may be designed to help inform instruction, to anticipate how a student might perform on the required state assessments, or for other purposes. Some of the more common assessments administered by LEAs in Pennsylvania are listed below. None of these assessments is required by state or federal law; they are adopted by LEAs for various local purposes.⁸

- Kindergarten Entry Inventory (KEI)
- Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test (PSAT)
- Informal Reading Inventory (IRI)
- Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS)
- Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA)
- Diagnostic Assessment of Reading (DAR)
- Advanced Placement (AP)
- Measures of Academic Progress (MAP)
- Classroom Diagnostic Tools (CDT)
- AIMSweb
- Diagnostic Mathematics Assessment (DMA)
- Scholastic Math Inventory (SMI)

⁷ Under the previous reauthorization of ESEA, known as the No Child Left Behind Act, the percent of students who could take the alternative exam and count as “proficient” for accountability purposes was capped at 1 percent. ESSA continues to cap statewide participation in the alternative assessment at 1 percent but specifically disallows any state or the US Department of Education (USDOE) from ascribing any negative consequence for any school or LEA that exceeds the 1 percent cap. The decision to administer the regular or alternative assessment belongs exclusively to the IEP team. Any state that exceeds the 1 percent cap on the alternative assessment may apply to USDOE for a waiver.

⁸ In some cases, LEAs may adopt formative or diagnostic assessments because of a perception that the use of such assessments improves the chances of qualifying for state or federal school improvement or other program funds.

Conclusion.

Pennsylvania does not require any more tests than are required by federal law. On average, the PSSA and Keystone Exams takes up to about 12 hours a year for each student in a tested grade. Students may lose additional instructional time because of make-up exams that can pull teachers and students out of classrooms. However, this does not explain the 110 hours of test preparation and 20 to 50 hours of annual assessment that students and their educators report experiencing.

Much of the time spent assessing students is the result of decisions made at the local level. To some extent, however, LEAs may be choosing to administer multiple diagnostic, benchmark, and other assessments because of a perception that these tests will help improve student performance on high-stakes state assessments. If LEAs are administering a burdensome number of assessments in the hopes of improving state test scores, then it may be the ***high-stakes consequences associated with state and federal accountability requirements*** that have the greatest impact on time spent on student assessment rather than the state- and federally-mandated assessments themselves.

Educators, parents, students, policymakers, and others who hope to reduce time spent on standardized testing and increase time for teaching and learning should focus on reducing high-stakes consequences associated with state assessments. It is these consequences, more than the assessments themselves, that seem to drive LEA decisions to administer more and more standardized tests.

For More Information.

PSEA members may contact Carla Claycomb in PSEA's Education Services Department, cclaycomb@psea.org to learn more about state and federal assessment requirements.

