



# A BALANCED AND RESEARCH-BASED APPROACH TO STANDARDIZED TESTING

---

*A PSEA Policy Brief*



**PSEA** PENNSYLVANIA  
STATE EDUCATION  
ASSOCIATION

## **SOLUTIONS THAT WORK**

*We're rewriting the book on education*



## A Balanced and Research-based Approach to Standardized Testing A PSEA Policy Brief

Tests are designed for specific purposes. Pennsylvania’s teachers and teacher aides use tests as one component among many to provide a well-rounded education and prepare students to succeed in their lives and careers. The tests they use for classroom learning are very different from federally required standardized tests. PSEA believes it is important for policymakers and parents to understand the differences between these tests, place testing in proper perspective regarding education quality, and support policies that connect tests with their legitimate purposes.

### Policy Recommendations in Brief

State-level policies around testing should:

- Reduce the amount of classroom time spent on the Pennsylvania State Standardized Assessment (PSSA).
- Separate Keystone Exams from graduation requirements.
- Ensure that statewide standardized tests be used only for government accountability requirements.

### Recommendation 1

#### *Balancing Instruction, Curriculum, and Assessment*

**Reduce the amount of classroom time spent on the Pennsylvania State Standardized Assessment (PSSA)**

*PSEA’s goal is to give teachers the latitude to teach the skills and content needed to create well-rounded, educated adults capable of more than merely demonstrating proficiency on a standardized test. Policymakers should allow for a rebalanced emphasis on curriculum, instruction, and assessment by reducing the time spent on preparing and administering these tests.*

Children are taking an unprecedented number of tests every year. Some tests, like those developed by teachers, provide immediate feedback to both students and teachers and drive how a teacher personalizes, modifies, and improves instruction.

Federally mandated standardized tests, however, are different. They do not have the same personal benefits to students, and the data they provide offers limited insight into school performance. Whether we call them high-stakes, government-mandated, or simply acknowledge them as causing anxiety for students and teachers, the practical effect of these government-mandated standardized tests is often highly disturbing.

First-graders who love school say they are afraid of third grade because of the PSSA. High school students spend the three-week testing window focused on Keystone Exams and the accompanying security requirements which virtually shut down instruction. Perhaps these tests would garner greater support if the infor-

mation benefited children in any measurable way. Unfortunately, however, federally mandated standardized test scores tell us little about schools that we did not already know through other means.

Nonetheless, policymakers place substantial weight on statewide test scores. As a result, standardized tests have an outsized influence on classroom practices. The test prep that often goes along with these tests has the power to decimate curriculum and limit opportunities for enrichment and discovery - two factors essential for developing lifelong learners.

Statewide testing is required by the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) but this new federal law gives Pennsylvania an opportunity to rebalance its state testing policy. PSSAs are the tests that Pennsylvania students take in third through eighth grades in math and English language arts and in fifth and eighth grades in science. The length of the test and the specific content of the test are determined by the state to measure student performance on the state's academic standards.

This is how the process should work: The state develops academic standards, school districts review those standards and develop curriculum that covers the standards and is appropriate for their communities; teachers design and deliver instruction consistent with the curriculum; and students take state tests to determine the extent to which they collectively have learned the standards.

In reality, the PSSAs do not test all of the PA Core Standards, due to at least three contributing factors:

- Only three subjects are tested.
- By nature these types of tests only test a sampling of the standards.
- State tests are administered in the spring, before the end of the school year, thus missing content taught after the testing window.

Unfortunately, because of the weight assigned to the results of the federally required tests and the additional ways they are used by the state and school districts, the focus has shifted from using the results to improve curriculum and instruction to improving test scores.

ESSA requires states to use standardized tests as part of a larger accountability system. It is appropriate to use standardized tests as a tool to identify schools that need additional supports, as discussed below. But it is not appropriate – or required by ESSA – to use standardized tests to determine graduation eligibility or identify individual students' instructional needs.

If standardized test results were only used to identify schools that need additional supports, standardized testing could occur as close to the end of the school year as possible, giving greater time for instruction.

Overall, in considering testing time, testing preparation, time spent on curriculum, instruction, and assessment, and testing placement within the school year, schools spend too much classroom time on testing and test prep because of federal and state policies.

### Key Points

- Standardized tests have outsized influence on classroom practices.
- Standardized testing prep can decimate curriculum.
- Standardized testing causes anxiety for students and teachers.

Pennsylvania’s standardized tests should be:

- Shorter, reducing the number of hours students must spend taking the tests and in test prep.
- Administered at the end of the year so they are aligned with curriculum and the timing of instruction.
- Valid and reliable measures of the target knowledge and skills.
- Accessible for all students by using principles of universal design and specific accommodations consistent with the individual education plans (IEPs) of students with disabilities.

## Recommendation 2

### *Ensuring Appropriate Uses for Student Tests* Separate Testing from Graduation Requirements

*PSEA’s goal is to ensure that statewide standardized testing is appropriately used. Policymakers should not use these tests as graduation requirements; students’ readiness to graduate should be based on multiple measures, including teacher-created tests and class projects.*

All Pennsylvania students must take end-of-course tests in algebra, biology, and English literature. They are known as the Keystone Exams. The exams satisfy the federal requirement that all students be tested in high school in math, English language arts, and science. But results on the exams are used for more than the federal purpose of helping to identify low-performing schools. They take on greater significance because they are scheduled to be used in the future to make graduation decisions about individual students.

Students can take Keystone Exams in either middle or high school. The tests are offered three times a year: winter, spring, and summer. However, most students take each test only at the end of their course. Students receive a score of Below Basic, Basic, Proficient, or Advanced. Students who do not score Proficient or Advanced must take supplemental instruction and re-test.

Act 1 of 2016 delayed the use of the Keystone Exams as a graduation requirement until 2019. So, students graduating in 2017 or 2018 will not be required to retake any of the Keystone Exams if they score Basic or Below Basic. Students graduating in 2017 or 2018 do have the option of participating in supplemental instruction and retaking the test. School districts must offer supplemental instruction to those students who score Basic or Below Basic on any Keystone Exam, but those students are not required to participate, according to guidance from the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

No single standardized test should be used as a bar to a student earning a diploma. Such important decisions about individuals should be made using multiple measures, and the ultimate decision should be made by teachers and administrators who can see the whole record and actually know the student and his or her academic achievement. Further, placing this much emphasis on results of one test increases the pressure for test preparation and test practice, often at the expense of instruction for enrichment and understanding.

#### Key Points

- No single standardized test should bar a student from earning a diploma.
- Important student decisions should be made based on multiple measures.
- Teachers and administrators know a student’s whole record.

### Recommendation 3

#### *Strengthen Support for Low-Performing Schools* Using Statewide Standardized Tests Only for Government Accountability Requirements

*PSEA's goal is to ensure that government requirements are met in a manner that effectively and efficiently ensures accountability in Pennsylvania's education system to provide every student equal opportunity and access to a great education. Policymakers should reduce the purposes of standardized tests, emphasize growth controlled by socioeconomic status, recognize the need for multiple measures, and focus on those purposes that are valid, reliable, and necessary to meet federal requirements.*

The Every Student Succeeds Act requires Pennsylvania to develop a school accountability system to identify and support the state's lowest performing 5 percent of schools, high schools failing to graduate one third or more of their students, schools that have underperforming subgroups, and schools that have consistently underperforming subgroups. These schools ultimately will be subject to state intervention.

More specifically, the law requires the state to adopt indicators consistent with federally established parameters to measure all public schools on academic proficiency, progress of English language learners, and graduation rates. Unfortunately, a school's standardized test results are highly correlated with the wealth and socioeconomic status of the students who attend it. So, to the extent that scores are used to label schools, they are being labeled based on the composition of their student bodies.

To be fair and accurate, statistical controls for the socioeconomic status of the school and community must be built into a measure of academic growth. Together, these indicators could be part of an accountability system that diagnoses and supports the specific needs of struggling schools and moves away from the outdated, punitive and ineffective interventions of No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

ESSA also requires at least one school quality indicator. However, since low standardized test scores alone do not explain why a school scored as it did or how a school could improve, multiple measures are necessary and should be adopted by the state including indicators in student engagement, educator engagement, student access to and completion of advanced coursework, post-secondary readiness, and school climate and safety. Even with multiple measures, identified schools will require further exploration regarding the school and the school community to design appropriate supports and interventions to ensure continuous improvement, recognizing that often improvement must be powered through additional resources.

#### Key Points

- Low standardized test scores alone do not explain a school's performance.
- The state should adopt multiple measures of school performance.
- Appropriate supports for low-performing schools may need to include additional resources.